

THE

BELTON ESTATE.

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BY

ANTHONY TROLLOPE,

Date;

AUTHOR OF

"CAN YOU FORGIVE HER?" "ORLEY FARM," "FRAMLEY PARSONAGE," ETC., ETC.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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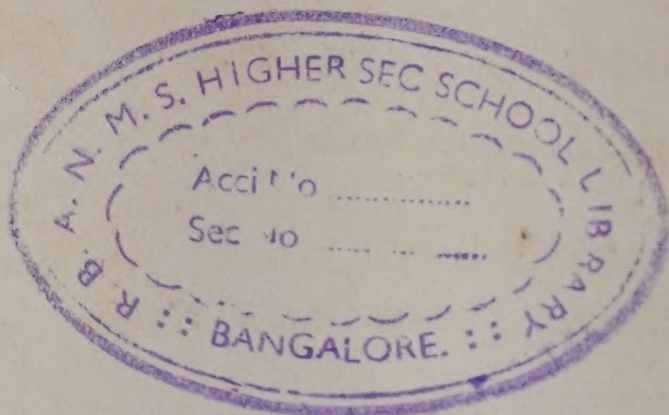
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THE BELTON ESTATE.

CHAPTER I.

THE LAST DAY AT BELTON.

IN course of post there came an answer from Lady Aylmer, naming a day for Clara's journey to Yorkshire, and also a letter from Captain Aylmer, in which he stated that he would meet her in London and convey her down to Aylmer Park. "The House is sitting," he said, "and therefore I shall be a little troubled about my time; but I cannot allow that your first meeting with my mother should take place in my absence." This was all very well, but at the end of the letter there

was a word of caution that was not so well. "I am sure, my dear Clara, that you will remember how much is due to my mother's age, and character, and position. Nothing will be wanted to the happiness of our marriage, if you can succeed in gaining her affection, and therefore I make it my first request to you that you should endeavour to win her good opinion." There was nothing perhaps really amiss, certainly nothing unreasonable, in such words from a future husband to his future wife; but Clara, as she read them, shook her head and pressed her foot against the ground in anger. It would not do. Sorrow would come, and trouble and disappointment. She did not say so, even to herself, in words; but the words, though not spoken, were audible enough to herself. She could not, would not, bend to Lady Aylmer, and she knew that trouble would come of this visit.

I fear that many ladies will condemn Miss Amedroz when I tell them that she showed this letter to her cousin Will. It does not promise well for any of the parties concerned

when a young woman with two lovers can bring herself to show the love-letters of him to whom she is engaged to the other lover whom she has refused! But I have two excuses to put forward in Clara's defence. In the first place, Captain Aylmer's love-letters were not in truth love-letters, but were letters of business; and in the next place, Clara was teaching herself to regard Will Belton as her brother, and to forget that he had ever assumed the part of a lover.

She was so teaching herself, but I cannot say that the lesson was one easily learned; nor had the outrage upon her of which Will had been guilty, and which was described in the last chapter, made the teaching easier. But she had determined nevertheless, that it should be so. When she thought of Will her heart would become very soft towards him; and sometimes, when she thought of Captain Aylmer, her heart would become anything but soft towards him. Unloving feelings would be very strong within her bosom as she re-read his letters, and remembered that he

had not come to her, but had sent her seventy-five pounds to comfort her in her trouble! Nevertheless, he was to be her husband, and she would do her duty. What might have happened had Will Belton come to Belton Castle before she had known Frederic Aylmer,—of that she stoutly resolved that she would never think at all; and consequently the thought was always intruding upon her.

“You will sleep one night in town, of course?” said Will.

“I suppose so. You know all about it. I shall do as I’m told.”

“You can’t go down to Yorkshire from here in one day. Where would you like to stay in London?”

“How on earth should I know? Ladies do sleep at hotels in London sometimes, I suppose?”

“Oh yes. I can write and have rooms ready for you.”

“Then that difficulty is over,” said Clara.

But in Belton’s estimation the difficulty was not exactly over. Captain Aylmer would, of

course, be in London that night, and it was a question with Will whether or no Clara was not bound in honour to tell the—accursed beast, I am afraid Mr. Belton called him in his soliloquies—where she would lodge on the occasion. Or would it suffice that he, Will, should hand her over to the enemy at the station of the Great Northern Railway on the following morning. All the little intricacies of the question presented themselves to Will's imagination. How careful he would be with her, that the inn accommodation should suffice for her comfort! With what pleasure would he order a little dinner for them two, making something of a gentle *fête* of the occasion! How sedulously would he wait upon her with those little attentions, amounting almost to worship, with which such men as Will Belton are prone to treat all women in exceptionable circumstances, when the ordinary routine of life has been disturbed! If she had simply been his cousin, and if he had never regarded her otherwise, how happily could he have done all this! As things now were, if it was left to

him to do, he should do it, with what patience and grace might be within his power; he would do it, though he would be mindful every moment of the bitterness of the transfer which he would so soon be obliged to make; but he doubted whether it would not be better for Clara's sake that the transfer should be made over-night. He would take her up to London, because in that way he could be useful; and then he would go away and hide himself. "Has Captain Aylmer said where he would meet you?" he asked after a pause.

"Of course I must write and tell him."

"And is he to come to you,—when you reach London?"

"He has said nothing about that, He will probably be at the House of Commons, or too busy somewhere to come to me then. But why do you ask? Do you wish to hurry through town?"

"Oh dear, no."

"Or perhaps you have friends you want to see. Pray don't let me be in your way. I shall do very well, you know."

Belton rebuked her by a look before he answered her. "I was only thinking," he said, "of what would be most convenient for yourself. I have nobody to see, and nothing to do, and nowhere to go to." Then Clara understood it all, and said that she would write to Captain Aylmer and ask him to join them at the hotel.

She determined that she would see Mrs. Askerton before she went; and as that lady did not come to the Castle, Clara called upon her at the cottage. This she did, the day before she left, and she took her cousin with her. Belton had been at the cottage once or twice since the day on which Mrs. Askerton had explained to him how the Aylmer alliance might be extinguished, but Colonel Askerton had always been there, and no reference had been made to the former conversation. Colonel Askerton was not there now, and Belton was almost afraid that words would be spoken to which he would hardly know how to listen.

"And so you are really going?" said Mrs. Askerton.

“Yes; we start to-morrow,” said Clara.

“I am not thinking of the journey to London,” said Mrs. Askerton, “but of the danger and privations of your subsequent progress to the North.”

“I shall do very well. I am not afraid that any one will eat me.”

“There are so many different ways of eating people! Are there not, Mr. Belton?”

“I don’t know about eating, but there are a great many ways of boring people,” said he.

“And I should think they will be great at that kind of thing at Aylmer Castle. One never hears of Sir Anthony, but I can fancy Lady Aylmer to be a terrible woman.”

“I shall manage to hold my own, I dare say,” said Clara.

“I hope you will; I do hope you will,” said Mrs. Askerton. “I don’t know whether you will be powerful to do so, or whether you will fail; my heart is not absolute; but I do know what will be the result if you are successful.”

“It is much more than I know myself.”

“That I can believe too. Do you travel down to Yorkshire alone?”

“No; Captain Aylmer will meet me in town.”

Then Mrs. Askerton looked at Mr. Belton, but made no immediate reply; nor did she say anything further about Clara's journey. She looked at Mr. Belton, and Will caught her eye, and understood that he was being rebuked for not having carried out that little scheme which had been prepared for him. But he had come to hate the scheme, and almost hated Mrs. Askerton for proposing it. He had declared to himself that her welfare, Clara's welfare, was the one thing which he should regard; and he had told himself that he was not strong enough, either in purpose or in wit, to devise schemes for her welfare. She was better able to manage things for herself than he was to manage them for her. If she loved this “accursed beast,” let her marry him; only,—for that was now his one difficulty,—only he could not bring himself to think it possible that she should love him.

"I suppose you will never see this place again?" said Mrs. Askerton after a long pause.

"I hope I shall, very often," said Clara. "Why should I not see it again? It is not going out of the family."

"No; not exactly out of the family. That is, it will belong to your cousin."

"And cousins may be as far apart as strangers, you mean; but Will and I ~~am~~^{are} not like that; are we, Will?"

"I hardly know what we are like," said he.

"You do not mean to say that you will throw me over? But the truth is, Mrs. Askerton, that I do not mean to be thrown over. I look upon him as my brother, and I intend to cling to him as sisters do cling."

"You will hardly come back here before you are married," said Mrs. Askerton. It was a terrible speech for her to make, and could only be excused on the ground that the speaker was in truth desirous of doing that which she thought would benefit both of those whom she addressed. "Of course you are going to your wedding now?"

“I am doing nothing of the kind,” said Clara. “How can you speak in that way to me so soon after my father’s death? It is a rebuke to me for being here at all.”

“I intend no rebuke, as you well know. What I mean is this; if you do not stay in Yorkshire till you are married, let the time be when it may, where do you intend to go in the meantime?”

“My plans are not settled yet.”

“She will have this house if she pleases,” said Will. “There will be no one else here. It will be her own, to do as she likes with it.”

“She will hardly come here,—to be alone.”

“I will not be inquired into, my dear,” said Clara, speaking with restored good-humour. “Of course I am an unprotected female, and subject to disadvantages. Perhaps I have no plans for the future; and if I have plans, perhaps I do not mean to divulge them.”

“I had better come to the point at once,” said Mrs. Askerton. “If—if—if it should ever suit you, pray come here to us. Flowers shall

not be more welcome in May. It is difficult to speak of it all, though you both understand everything as well as I do. I cannot press my invitation as another woman might."

"Yes, you can," said Clara with energy. "Of course you can."

"Can I? Then I do. Dear Clara, do come to us." And then as she spoke Mrs. Askerton knelt on the ground at her visitor's knees. "Mr. Belton, do tell her that when she is tired with the grandeur of Aylmer Park she may come to us here."

"I don't know anything about the grandeur of Aylmer Park," said Will, suddenly.

"But she may come here;—may she not?"

"She will not ask my leave," said he.

"She says that you are her brother. Whose leave should she ask?"

"He knows that I should ask his rather than that of any living person," said Clara.

"There, Mr. Belton. Now you must say that she may come;—or that she may not."

"I will say nothing. She knows what to do much better than I can tell her."

Mrs. Askerton was still kneeling, and again appealed to Clara. "You hear what he says. What do you say yourself? Will you come to us?—that is, if such a visit will suit you,—in point of convenience?"

"I will make no promise; but I know no reason why I should not."

"And I must be content with that? Well: I will be content." Then she got up. "For such a one as I am, that is a great deal. And, Mr. Belton, let me tell you this;—I can be grateful to you, though you cannot be gracious to me."

"I hope I have not been ungracious," said he.

"Upon my word, I cannot compliment you. But there is something so much better than grace, that I can forgive you. You know, at any rate, how thoroughly I wish you well."

Upon this Clara got up to take her leave, and the demonstrative affection of an embrace between the two women afforded a remedy for the awkwardness of the previous conversation.

“God bless you, dearest,” said Mrs. Askerton. “May I write to you?”

“Certainly,” said Clara.

“And you will answer my letters?”

“Of course I will. You must tell me everything about the place;—and especially as to Bessy. Bessy is never to be sold;—is she, Will?” Bessy was the cow which Belton had given her.

“Not if you choose to keep her.”

“I will go down and see to her myself,” said Mrs. Askerton, “and will utter little prayers of my own over her horns,—that certain events that I desire may come to pass. Good-bye, Mr. Belton. You may be as ungracious as you please, but it not will make any difference.”

When Clara and her cousin left the cottage they did not return to the house immediately, but took a last walk round the park, and through the shrubbery, and up to the rocks on which a remarkable scene had once taken place between them. Few words were spoken as they were walking, and there had been no

agreement as to the path they would take. Each seemed to understand that there was much of melancholy in their present mood, and that silence was more fitting than speech. But when they reached the rocks Belton sat himself down, asking Clara's leave to stop there for a moment. "I don't suppose I shall ever come to this place again," said he.

"You are as bad as Mrs. Askerton," said Clara.

"I do not think I shall ever come to this place again," said he, repeating his words very solemnly. "At any rate, I will never do so willingly, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you are either my wife, or have promised to become so."

"Oh, Will; you know that that is impossible."

"Then it is impossible that I should come here again."

"You know that I am engaged to another man."

"Of course I do. I am not asking you to

break your engagement. I am simply telling you that in spite of that engagement I love you as well as I did love you before you had made it. I have a right to let you know the truth." As if she had not known it without his telling it to her now! "It was here that I told you that I loved you. I now repeat it here; and will never come here again unless I may say the same thing over and over and over. That is all. We might as well go on now." But when he got up she sat down, as though unwilling to leave the spot. It was still winter, and the rock was damp with cold drippings from the trees, and the moss around was wet, and little pools of water had formed themselves in the shallow holes upon the surface. She did not speak as she seated herself; but he was of course obliged to wait till she should be ready to accompany him. "It is too cold for you to sit there," he said. "Come, Clara; I will not have you loiter here. It is cold and wet."

"It is not colder for me than for you."

"You are not used to that sort of thing as I am."

“Will,” she said, “you must never speak to me again as you spoke just now. Promise me that you will not.”

“Promises will do no good in such a matter.”

“It is almost a repetition of what you did before;—though of course it is not so bad as that.”

“Everything I do is bad.”

“No, Will:—dear Will! Almost everything you do is good. But of what use can it be to either of us for you to be thinking of that which can never be. Cannot you think of me as your sister,—and only as your sister?”

“No; I cannot.”

“Then it is not right that we should be together.”

“I know nothing of right. You ask me a question, and I suppose you don’t wish that I should tell you a lie.”

“Of course I do not wish that.”

“Therefore I tell you the truth. I love you,—as any other man loves the girl that he

does love ; and, as far as I know myself now, I never can be happy unless you are my own."

"Oh, Will, how can that be when I am engaged to marry another man?"

"As to your engagement I should care nothing. Does he love you as I love you. If he loves you, why is he not here? If he loves you, why does he let his mother ill-use you, and treat you with scorn? If he loves you as I love you, how could he write to you as he does write? Would I write to you such a letter as that? Would I let you be here without coming to you,—to be looked after by any one else? If you had said that you would be my wife, would I leave you in solitude and sorrow, and then send you seventy-five pounds to console you? If you think he loves you, Clara——"

"He thought he was doing right when he sent me the money."

"But he shouldn't have thought it right. Never mind. I don't want to accuse him; but this I know,—and you know; he does not love you as I love you."

“What can I say to answer you?”

“Say that you will wait till you have seen him. Say that I may have a hope,—a chance; that if he is cold, and hard, and,—and,—and, just what we know he is, then I may have a chance.”

“How can I say that when I am engaged to him? Cannot you understand that I am wrong to let you speak of him as you do?”

“How else am I to speak of him? Tell me this. Do you love him?”

“Yes;—I do.”

“I don’t believe it!”

“Will!”

“I don’t believe it. Nothing on earth shall make me believe it. It is impossible;—impossible!”

“Do you mean to insult me, Will?”

“No; I do not mean to insult you, but I mean to tell you the truth. I do not think you love that man as you ought to love the man whom you are going to marry. I should tell you just the same thing if I were really your brother. Of course it isn’t that I sup-

pose you love any one else,—me for instance. I'm not such a fool as that. But I don't think you love him; and I'm quite sure he doesn't love you. That's just what I believe; and if I do believe it, how am I to help telling you?"

"You've no right to have such beliefs."

"How am I to help it? Well;—never mind. I won't let you sit there any longer. At any rate you'll be able to understand now that I shall never come to this place any more." Clara, as she got up to obey him, felt that she also ought never to see it again;—unless, indeed,—unless——

They passed that evening together without any reference to the scene on the rock, or any allusion to their own peculiar troubles. Clara, though she would not admit to Mrs. Askerton that she was going away from the place for ever, was not the less aware that such might very probably be the case. She had no longer any rights of ownership at Belton Castle, and a'l that had taken place between her and her cousin tended to make her feel that under no

circumstances could she again reside there. Nor was it probable that she would be able to make to Mrs. Askerton the visit of which they had been talking. If Lady Aylmer were wise,—so Clara thought,—there would be no mention of Mrs. Askerton at Aylmer park; and, if so, of course she would not outrage her future husband by proposing to go to a house of which she knew that he disapproved. If Lady Aylmer were not wise;—if she should take upon herself the task of rebuking Clara for her friendship,—then, in such circumstances as those, Clara believed that the visit to Mrs. Askerton might be possible.

But she determined that she would leave the home in which she had been born, and had passed so many happy and so many unhappy days, as though she were never to see it again. All her packing had been done, down to the last fragment of an old letter that was stuffed into her writing-desk; but, nevertheless, she went about the house with a candle in her hand, as though she were still looking that nothing had been omitted, while she was in

truth saying farewell in her heart to every corner which she knew so well. When at last she came down to pour out for her desolate cousin his cup of tea, she declared that everything was done. "You may go to work now, Will," she said, "and do what you please with the old place. My jurisdiction in it is over."

"Not altogether," said he. He no longer spoke like a despairing lover. Indeed there was a smile round his mouth, and his voice was cheery.

"Yes;—altogether. I give over my sovereignty from this moment;—and a dirty dilapidated sovereignty it is."

"That's all very well to say."

"And also very well to do. What best pleases me in going to Aylmer Castle just now is the power it gives me of doing at once that which otherwise I might have put off till the doing of it had become much more unpleasant. Mr. Belton, there is the key of the cellar,—which I believe gentlemen always regard as the real sign of possession. I don't advise you to trust much to the contents." He took the

key from her, and without saying a word chucked it across the room on to an old sofa.

"If you won't take it, you had better, at any rate, have it tied up with the others," she said.

"I dare say you'll know where to find it when you want it," he answered.

"I shall never want it."

"Then it's as well there as anywhere else."

"But you won't remember, Will."

"I don't suppose I shall have occasion for remembering." Then he paused a moment before he went on. "I have told you before that I do not intend to take possession of the place. I do not regard it as mine at all."

"And whose is it, then?"

"Yours."

"No, dear Will; it is not mine. You know that."

"I intend that it shall be so, and therefore you might as well put the keys where you will know how to find them."

After he had gone she did take up the key, and tied it with sundry others, which she intended to give to the old servant who was to

be left in charge of the house. But after a few moments' consideration she took the cellar key again off the bunch, and put it back upon the sofa,—in the place to which he had thrown it.

On the following morning they started on their journey. The old fly from Redicote was not used on this occasion, as Belton had ordered a pair of post-horses and a comfortable carriage from Taunton. "I think it such a shame," said Clara, "going away for the last time without having Jerry and the grey horse." Jerry was the man who had once driven her to Taunton when the old horse fell with her on the road. "But Jerry and the grey horse could not have taken you and me too, and all our luggage," said Will. "Poor Jerry! I suppose not," said Clara; "but still there is an injury done in going without him."

There were four or five old dependants of the family standing round the door to bid her adieu, to all of whom she gave her hand with a cordial pressure. They, at least, seemed to regard her departure as final. And of course it was final. She had assured herself of that

during the night. And just as they were about to start, both Colonel and Mrs. Askerton walked up to the door. "He wouldn't let you go without bidding you farewell," said Mrs. Askerton. "I am so glad to shake hands with him," Clara answered. Then the Colonel spoke a word to her, and, as he did so, his wife contrived to draw Will Belton for a moment behind the carriage. "Never give it up, Mr. Belton," said she, eagerly. "If you persevere she'll be yours yet." "I fear not," he said. "Stick to her like a man," said she, pressing his hand in her vehemence. "If you do, you'll live to thank me for having told you so." Will had not a word to say for himself, but he thought that he would stick to her. Indeed, he thought that he had stuck to her pretty well.

At last they were off, and the village of Belton was behind them, Will, glancing into his cousin's face, saw that her eyes were laden with tears, and refrained from speaking. As they passed the ugly red-brick rectory-house, Clara for a moment put her face to the

window, and then withdrew it. . "There is nobody there," she said, "who will care to see me. Considering that I have lived here all my life, is it not odd that there should be so few to bid me good-bye?"

"People do not like to put themselves forward on such occasions," said Will.

"People!—there are no people. No one ever had so few to care for them as I have. And now——. But never mind; I mean to do very well, and I shall do very well." Belton would not take advantage of her in her sadness, and they reached the station at Taunton almost without another word.

Of course they had to wait there for half an hour, and of course the waiting was very tedious. To Will it was very tedious indeed, as he was not by nature good at waiting. To Clara, who on this occasion sat perfectly still in the waiting-room, with her toes on the fender before the fire, the evil of the occasion was not so severe. "The man would take two hours for the journey, though I told him an

hour and a half would be enough," said Will, querulously.

"But we might have had an accident."

"An accident! What accident? People don't have accidents every day."

At last the train came and they started. Clara, though she had with her her best friend,—I may almost say the friend whom in the world she loved the best,—did not have an agreeable journey. Belton would not talk; but as he made no attempt at reading, Clara did not like to have recourse to the book which she had in her travelling-bag. He sat opposite to her, opening the window and shutting it as he thought she might like it, but looking wretched and forlorn. At Swindon he brightened up for a moment under the excitement of getting her something to eat, but that relaxation lasted only for a few minutes. After that he relapsed again into silence till the train had passed Slough, and he knew that in another half-hour they would be in London. Then he leant over her and spoke.

“This will probably be the last opportunity I shall have of saying a few words to you,—alone.”

“I don’t know that at all, Will.”

“It will be the last for a long time at any rate. And as I have got something to say, I might as well say it now. I have thought a great deal about the property,—the Belton Estate, I mean; and I don’t intend to take it as mine.

“That is sheer nonsense, Will. You must take it, as it is yours, and can’t belong to any one else.”

“I have thought it over, and I am quite sure that all the business of the entail was wrong,—radically wrong from first to last. You are to understand that my special regard for you has nothing whatever to do with it. I should do the same thing if I felt that I hated you.”

“Don’t hate me, Will!”

“You know what I mean. I think the entail was all wrong, and I shan’t take advantage of it. It’s not common sense that I

should have everything because of poor Charley's misfortune."

"But it seems to me that it does not depend upon you or upon me, or upon anybody. It is yours,—by law, you know."

"And therefore it won't be sufficient for me to give it up without making it yours by law also,—which I intend to do. I shall stay in town to-morrow and give instructions to Mr. Green. I have thought it proper to tell you this now, in order that you may mention it to Captain Aylmer."

They were leaning over in the carriage one towards the other ; her face had been slightly turned away from him ; but now she slowly raised her eyes till they met his, and looking into the depth of them, and seeing there all his love and all his suffering, and the great nobility of his nature, her heart melted within her. Gradually, as her tears came,—would come, in spite of all her constraint, she again turned her face towards the window. "I can't talk now," she said, "indeed I can't "

There is no need for any more talking about

it," he replied. And there was no more talking between them on that subject, or on any other, till the tickets had been taken and the train was again in motion. Then he referred to it again for a moment. "You will tell Captain Aylmer, my dear."

"I will tell him what you say, that he may know your generosity. But of course he will agree with me that no such offer can be accepted. It is quite,—quite,—quite,—out of the question."

"You had better tell him and say nothing more; or you can ask him to see Mr. Green,—after to-morrow. He, as a man who understands business, will know that this arrangement must be made, if I choose to make it. Come; here we are. Porter, a four-wheeled cab. Do you go with him, and I'll look after the luggage."

Clara, as she got into the cab, felt that she ought to have been more stout in her resistance to his offer. But it would be better, perhaps, that she should write to him from Aylmer Park, and get Frederic to write also.

CHAPTER II.

THE GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY HOTEL.

AT the door of the hotel of the Great Northern Railway Station they met Captain Aylmer. Rooms had been taken there because they were to start by an early train on that line in the morning, and Captain Aylmer had undertaken to order dinner. There was nothing particular in the meeting to make it unpleasant to our friend Will. The fortunate rival could do no more in the hall of the inn than give his hand to his affianced bride, as he might do to any other lady, and then suggest to her that she should go up-stairs and see her room. When he had done this, he also offered his

hand to Belton; and Will, though he would almost sooner have cut off his own, was obliged to take it. In a few minutes the two men were standing alone together in the sitting-room.

“I suppose you found it cold coming up?” said the captain.

“Not particularly,” said Will.

“It’s rather a long journey from Belton.”

“Not very long,” said Will.

“Not for you, perhaps; but Miss Amedroz must be tired.”

Belton was angry at having his cousin called Miss Amedroz,—feeling that the reserve of the name was intended to keep him at a distance. But he would have been equally angry had Aylmer called her Clara.

“My cousin,” said Will stoutly, “is able bear slight fatigue of that kind without suffering.”

“I didn’t suppose she suffered; but journeys are always tedious, especially where there is so much road-work. I believe you are twenty miles from the station?”

“Belton Castle is something over twenty miles from Taunton.”

“We are seven from our station at Aylmer Park, and we think that a great deal.”

“I’m more than that at Plaistow,” said Will.

“Oh, indeed. Plaistow is in Norfolk, I believe?”

“Yes ;—Plaistow is in Norfolk.”

“I suppose you’ll leave it now and go into Somersetshire,” suggested Captain Aylmer.

“Certainly not. Why should I leave it?”

“I thought, perhaps,—as Belton Castle is now your own——”

“Plaistow Hall is more my own than Belton Castle, if that signifies anything,—which it doesn’t.” This he said in an angry tone, which, as he became conscious of it, he tried to rectify. “I’ve a deal of stock and all that sort of thing at Plaistow, and couldn’t very well leave it, even if I wished it,” he said.

“You’ve pretty good shooting too, I suppose,” said Aylmer.

“As far as partridges go I’ll back it against most properties of the same extent in any county.”

“I’m too busy a man myself,” said the Captain, “to do much at partridges. — We think more of pheasants down with us.”

“I dare say.”

“But a Norfolk man like you is of course keen about birds.”

“We are obliged to put up with what we’ve got, you know;—not but what I believe there is a better general head of game in Norfolk than in any other county in England.”

“That’s what makes your hunting rather poor.”

“Our hunting poor! Why do you say it’s poor?”

“So many of you are against preserving foxes.”

“I’ll tell you what, Captain Aylmer; I don’t know what pack you hunt with, but I’ll bet you a five-pound note that we killed more foxes last year than you did;—that is, taking

three days a week. Nine-and-twenty brace and a half in a short season I don't call poor at all."

Captain Aylmer saw that the man was waxing angry, and made no further allusion either to the glories or deficiencies of Norfolk. As he could think of no other subject on which to speak at the spur of the moment, he sat himself down and took up a paper; Belton took up another, and so they remained till Clara made her appearance. That Captain Aylmer read his paper is probable enough. He was not a man easily disconcerted, and there was nothing in his present position to disconcert him. But I feel sure that Will Belton did not read a word. He was angry with this rival, whom he hated, and was angry with himself for showing his anger. He would have wished to appear to the best advantage before this man, or rather before Clara in this man's presence; and he knew that in Clara's absence he was making such a fool of himself that he would be unable to recover his prestige. He had serious thoughts

within his own breast whether it would not be as well for him to get up from his seat and give Captain Aylmer a thoroughly good thrashing ;—" Drop into him and punch his head," as he himself would have expressed it. For the moment such an exercise would give him immense gratification. The final results would, no doubt, be disastrous ; but then, all future results, as far as he could see them, were laden with disaster. He was still thinking of this, eyeing the man from under the newspaper, and telling himself that the feat would probably be too easy to afford much enjoyment, when Clara re-entered the room. Then he got up, acting on the spur of the moment,—got up quickly and suddenly, and began to bid her adieu.

" But you are going to dine here Will ?" she said.

" No ; I think not."

" You promised you would. You told me you had nothing to do to-night." Then she turned to Captain Aylmer. " You expect my cousin to dine with us to-day ?"

"I ordered dinner for three," said Captain Aylmer.

"Oh, very well; it's all the same thing to me," said Will.

"And to me," said Captain Aylmer.

"It's not at all the same thing to me," said Clara. "I don't know when I may see my cousin again. I should think it very bad of you, Will, if you went away this evening."

"I'll go out just for half an hour," said he, "and be back to dinner."

"We dine at seven," said the Captain. Then Belton took his hat and left the two lovers together.

"Your cousin seems to be a rather surly sort of gentleman." Those were the first words which Captain Aylmer spoke when he was alone with the lady of his love. Nor was he demonstrative of his affection by any of the usual signs of regard which are permitted to accepted lovers. He did not offer to kiss her, nor did he attempt to take her hand with a warmer pressure now that he was alone with

her. He probably might have gone through some such ceremony had he first met Clara in a position propitious to such purposes ; but, as it was, he had been a little ruffled by Will Belton's want of good breeding, and had probably forgotten that any such privileges might have been his. I wonder whether any remembrance flashed across Clara's mind at this moment of her cousin Will's great iniquity in the sitting-room at Belton Castle. She thought of it very often, and may possibly have thought of it now.

"I don't believe that he is surly, Frederic," she said. "He may, perhaps, be out of humour."

"And why should he be out of humour with me? I only suggested to him that it might suit him to live at Belton instead of at that farm of his, down in Norfolk."

"He is very fond of Plaistow, I fancy."

"But that's no reason why he should be cross with me. I don't envy him his taste, that's all. If he can't understand that he, with his name, ought to live on the family

property which belongs to him, it isn't likely that anything that I can say will open his eyes upon the subject."

"The truth is, Frederic, he has some romantic notion about the Belton estate."

"What romantic notion?"

"He thinks it should not be his at all."

"Whose then? Who does he think should have it?"

"Of course there can be nothing in it, you know; of course it's all nonsense."

"But what is his idea? Who does he think should be the owner?"

"He means—that it should be—mine. But of course, Frederic, it is all nonsense; we know that."

It did not seem to be quite clear at the moment that Frederic had altogether made up his mind upon the subject. As he heard these tidings from Clara there came across his face a puzzled, dubious look, as though he did not quite understand the proposition which had been suggested to him;—as though some consideration were wanted before he could take

the idea home to himself and digest it, so as to enable himself to express an opinion upon it. There might be something in it,—some show of reason which did not make itself clear to Clara's feminine mind. "I have never known what was the precise nature of your father's marriage settlement," said he.

Then Clara began to explain with exceeding eagerness that there was no question as to the accuracy of the settlement, or the legality of the entail;—that indeed there was no question as to anything. Her cousin Will was romantic, and that was the end of it. Of course,—quite as a matter of course, this romance would lead to nothing; and she had only mentioned the subject now to show that her cousin's mind might possibly be disturbed when the question of his future residence was raised. "I quite feel with you," she said, "that it will be much nicer that he should live at the old family place; but just at present I do not speak about it."

"If he is thinking of not claiming Belton, it is quite another thing," said Aylmer.

“It is his without any claiming,” said Clara.

“Ah, well; it will all be settled before long,” said Aylmer.

“It is settled already,” said Clara.

At seven the three met again, and when the dinner was on the table there was some little trouble as to the helping of the fish. Which of the two men should take the lead on the occasion? But Clara decided the question by asking her cousin to make himself useful. There can be little doubt but that Captain Aylmer would have distributed the mutton chops with much more grace, and have carved the roast fowl with much more skill; but it suited Clara that Will should have the employment, and Will did the work. Captain Aylmer, throughout the dinner, endeavoured to be complaisant, and Clara exerted herself to talk as though all matters around them were easy. Will, too, made his effort, every now and then speaking a word, and restraining himself from snapping at his rival; but the restraint was in itself evident, and there were

symptoms throughout the dinner that the untamed man was longing to fly at the throat of the man that was tamed.

“Is it supposed that I ought to go away for a little while?” said Clara, as soon as she had drank her own glass of wine.

“Oh dear, no,” said the Captain. “We’ll have a cup of coffee;—that is, if Mr. Belton likes it.”

“It’s all the same to me,” said Will.

“But won’t you have some more wine?” Clara asked.

“No more for me,” said Captain Aylmer. “Perhaps Mr. Belton ——”

“Who; I? No; I don’t want any more wine,” said Will; and then they were all silent.

It was very hard upon Clara. After a while the coffee came, and even that was felt to be a comfort. Though there was no pouring out to be done, no actual employment enacted, still the manœuvring of the cups created a diversion. “If either of you like to smoke,” she said, “I shan’t mind it in the least.” But neither of

them would smoke. "At what hour shall we get to Aylmer Park to-morrow?" Clara asked.

"At half-past four," said the Captain.

"Oh, indeed ;—so early as that." What was she to say next? Will, who had not touched his coffee, and who was sitting stiffly at the table as though he were bound in duty not to move, was becoming more and more grim every moment. She almost repented that she had asked him to remain with them. Certainly there was no comfort in his company, either to them or to himself. "How long shall you remain in town, Will, before you go down to Plaistow?" she asked.

"One day," he replied.

"Give my kind love,—my very kindest love to Mary. I wish I knew her. I wish I could think that I might soon know her."

"You'll never know her," said Belton. The tone of his voice was actually savage as he spoke ;—so much so that Aylmer turned in his chair to look at him, and Clara did not dare to answer him. But now that he had been made to speak, it seemed that he was determined to

persevere. "How should you ever know her? Nothing will ever bring you into Norfolk, and nothing will ever take her out of it."

"I don't quite see why either of those assertions should be made."

"Nevertheless they're both true. Had you ever meant to come to Norfolk you would have come now." He had not even asked her to come, having arranged with his sister that in their existing circumstances any such asking would not be a kindness; and yet he rebuked her now for not coming!

"My mother is very anxious that Miss Amedroz should pay her a visit at Aylmer Park," said the Captain.

"And she's going to Aylmer Park, so your mother's anxiety need not disturb her any longer."

"Come, Will, don't be out of temper with us," said Clara. "It is our last night together. We, who are so dear to each other, ought not to quarrel."

"I'm not quarrelling with you," said he.

"I can hardly suppose that Mr. Belton

wants to quarrel with me," said Captain Aylmer, smiling.

"I'm sure he does not," said Clara. Belton sat silent, with his eyes fixed upon the table, and with a dark frown upon his brow. He did long to quarrel with Captain Aylmer; but was still anxious, if it might be possible, to save himself from what he knew would be a transgression.

"To use a phrase common with us down in Yorkshire," said Aylmer, "I should say that Mr. Belton had got out of bed the wrong side this morning."

"What the d—— does it matter to you, sir, what side I got out of bed?" said Will, clenching both his fists. Oh;—if he might only have been allowed to have a round of five minutes with Aylmer, he would have been restored to good temper for that night, let the subsequent results have been what they might. He moved his feet impatiently on the floor, as though he were longing to kick something; and then he pushed his coffee-cup away from him, upsetting half the contents upon the

table, and knocking down a wine-glass, which was broken.

“Will;—Will!” said Clara, looking at him with imploring eyes.”

“Then he shouldn’t talk to me about getting out of bed on the wrong side, I didn’t say anything to him.”

“It is unkind of you, Will, to quarrel with Captain Aylmer because he is my friend.”

“I don’t want to quarrel with him; or, rather, as I won’t quarrel with him because you don’t wish it, I’ll go away. I can’t do more than that. I didn’t want to dine with him here. There’s my cousin Clara, Captain Aylmer; I love her better than all the world besides. Love her! It seems to me that there’s nothing else in the world for me to love. I’d give my heart for her this minute. All that I have in the world is hers. Oh,—love her! I don’t believe that it’s in you to know what I mean when I say that I love her! She tells me that she’s going to be your wife. You can’t suppose that I can be very comfortable under those circumstances,—

or that I can be very fond of you. I'm not very fond of you. Now I'll go away, and then I shan't trouble you any more. But look here,—if ever you should ill-treat her, whether you marry her or whether you don't, I'll crush every bone in your skin." Having so spoken he went to the door, but stopped himself before he left the room. "Good-bye, Clara. I've got a word or two more to say to you, but I'll write you a line down-stairs. You can show it to him if you please. It'll only be about business. Good-night."

She had got up and followed him to the door, and he had taken her by the hand. "You shouldn't let your passion get the better of you in this way," she said; but the tone of her voice was very soft, and her eyes were full of love.

"I suppose not," said he.

"I can forgive him," said Captain Aylmer.

"D—— your forgiveness," said Will Belton. Then Clara dropped the hand and started back, and the door was shut, and Will Belton was gone.

“Your cousin seems to be a nice sort of young man,” said Aylmer.

“Cannot you understand it all, Frederic, and pardon him?”

“I can pardon him easily enough; but one doesn’t like men who are given to threatening. He’s not the sort of man that I took him to be.”

“Upon my word I think he’s as nearly perfect as a man can be.”

“Then you like men to swear at you, and to swagger like Bobadils, and to misbehave themselves, so that one has to blush for them if a servant chances to hear them. Do you really think that he has conducted himself to-day like a gentleman?”

“I know that he is a gentleman,” said Clara.

“I must confess I have no reason for supposing him to be so but your assurance.”

“And I hope that is sufficient, Frederic.”

Captain Aylmer did not answer her at once, but sat for awhile silent, considering what he would say. Clara, who understood his moods, knew that he did not mean to drop the subject,

and resolved that she would defend her cousin, let Captain Aylmer attack him as he would.

“ Upon my word, I hardly know what to say about it,” said Aylmer.

“ Suppose, then, that we say nothing more. Will not that be best ?”

“ No, Clara. I cannot now let the matter pass by in that way. You have asked me whether I do not think Mr. Belton to be a gentleman, and I must say that I doubt it. Pray hear me out before you answer me. I do not want to be harder upon him than I can help; and I would have borne, and I did bear from him, a great deal in silence. But he said that to me which I cannot allow to pass without notice. He had the bad taste to speak to me of his—his regard for you.”

“ I cannot see what harm he did by that;—except to himself.”

“ I believe that it is understood among gentlemen that one man never speaks to another man about the lady the other man means to marry, unless they are very intimate

friends indeed. What I mean is, that if Mr. Belton had understood how gentlemen live together he would never have said anything to me about his affection for you. He should at any rate have supposed me to be ignorant of it. There is something in the very idea of his doing so that is in the highest degree indelicate. I wonder, Clara, that you do not see this yourself."

"I think he was indiscreet."

"Indiscreet! Indiscreet is not the word for such conduct. I must say, that as far as my opinion goes, it was ungentlemanlike."

"I don't believe that there is a nobler-minded gentleman in all London than my cousin Will."

"Perhaps it gratified you to hear from him the assurance of his love?" said Captain Aylmer.

"If it is your wish to insult me, Frederic, I will leave you."

"It is my wish to make you understand that your judgment has been wrong."

"That is simply a matter of opinion, and as I

do not wish to argue with you about it, I had better go. At any rate I am very tired. Good-night, Frederic." He then told her what arrangements he had made for the morrow, at what hour she would be called, and when she would have her breakfast. After that he let her go without making any further allusion to Will Belton.

It must be admitted that the meeting between the lovers had not been auspicious; and it must be acknowledged, also, that Will Belton had behaved very badly. I am not aware of the existence of that special understanding among gentlemen in respect to the ladies they are going to marry which Captain Aylmer so eloquently described; but, nevertheless, I must confess that Belton would have done better had he kept his feelings to himself. And when he talked of crushing his rival's bones, he laid himself justly open to severe censure. But, for all that, he was no Bobadil. He was angry, sore, and miserable; and in his anger, soreness, and misery, he had allowed himself to be carried away. He felt very

keenly his own folly, even as he was leaving the room, and as he made his way out of the hotel he hated himself for his own braggadocio. "I wish some one would crush my bones," he said to himself almost audibly. "No one ever deserved to be crushed better than I do."

Clara, when she got to her own room, was very serious and very sad. What was to be the end of it all? This had been her first meeting after her father's death with the man whom she had promised to marry; indeed, it was the first meeting after her promise had been given; and they had only met to quarrel. There had been no word of love spoken between them. She had parted from him now almost in anger, without the slightest expression of confidence between them,—almost as those part who are constrained by circumstances to be together, but who yet hate each other and know that they hate each other. Was there in truth any love between him and her? And if there was none, could there be any advantage, any good either to him or to her, in this journey of hers to

Aylmer Park? Would it not be better that she should send for him and tell him that they were not suited for each other, and that thus she should escape from all the terrors of Lady Aylmer? As she thought of this, she could not but think of Will Belton also. Not a gentleman! If Will Belton was not a gentleman, she desired to know nothing further of gentlemen. Women are so good and kind that those whom they love they love almost the more when they commit offences, because of the offences so committed. Will Belton had been guilty of great offences,—of offences for which Clara was prepared to lecture him in the gravest manner should opportunities for such lectures ever come;—but I think that they had increased her regard for him rather than diminished it. She could not, however, make up her mind to send for Captain Aylmer, and when she went to bed she had resolved that the visit to Yorkshire must be made.

Before she left the room the following morning, a letter was brought to her from her cousin, which had been written that morning.

She asked the maid to inquire for him, and sent down word to him that if he were in the house she specially wished to see him; but the tidings came from the hall porter that he had gone out very early, and had expressly said that he should not breakfast at the inn.

The letter was as follows :—

“DEAR CLARA,

“I meant to have handed to you the enclosed in person, but I lost my temper last night,—like a fool as I am,—and so I couldn't do it. You need not have any scruple about the money which I send,—£100 in ten ten-pound notes,—as it is your own. There is the rent due up to your father's death, which is more than what I now enclose, and there will be a great many other items, as to all of which you shall have a proper account. When you want more, you had better draw on me, till things are settled. It shall all be done as soon as possible. It would not be comfortable for you to go away without money of your own, and I suppose you would not wish that he should

pay for your journeys and things before you are married.

“Of course I made a fool of myself yesterday. I believe that I usually do. It is not any good my begging your pardon, for I don’t suppose I shall ever trouble you any more. Good-bye, and God bless you.

“Your affectionate Cousin,

“WILLIAM BELTON.

“It was a bad day for me when I made up my mind to go to Belton Castle last summer.”

Clara, when she had read the letter, sat down and cried, holding the bundle of notes in her hand. What would she do with them? Should she send them back? Oh no;—she would do nothing to displease him, or to make him think that she was angry with him. Besides, she had none of that dislike to taking his money which she had felt as to receiving money from Captain Aylmer. He had said that she would be his sister, and she would

take from him any assistance that a sister might properly take from a brother.

She went down - stairs and met Captain Aylmer in the sitting-room. He stepped up to her as soon as the door was closed, and she could at once see that he had determined to forget the unpleasantnesses of the previous evening. He stepped up to her, and gracefully taking her by one hand, and passing the other behind her waist, saluted her in a becoming and appropriate manner. She did not like it. She especially disliked it, believing in her heart of hearts that she would never become the wife of this man whom she had professed to love,—and whom she really had once loved. But she could only bear it. And, to say the truth, there was not much suffering of that kind to be borne.

Their journey down to Yorkshire was very prosperous. He maintained his good humour throughout the day, and never once said a word about Will Belton. Nor did he say a word about Mrs. Askerton. “Do your best to please my mother, Clara,” he said, as they

were driving up from the park lodges to the house. This was fair enough, and she therefore promised him that she would do her best.

CHAPTER III.

MISS AMEDROZ HAS SOME HASHED CHICKEN.

CLARA felt herself to be a coward as the Aylmer Park carriage, which had been sent to meet her at the station, was drawn up at Sir Anthony Aylmer's door. She had made up her mind that she would not bow down to Lady Aylmer, and yet she was afraid of the woman. As she got out of the carriage, she looked up, expecting to see her in the hall; but Lady Aylmer was too accurately acquainted with the weights and measures of society for any such movement as that. Had her son brought Lady Emily to the house as his future bride, Lady Aylmer would probably have been

in the hall when the arrival took place ; and had Clara possessed ten thousand pounds of her own, she would probably have been met at the drawing-room door ; but as she had neither money nor title,—as she in fact brought with her no advantages of any sort, Lady Aylmer was found stitching a bit of worsted, as though she had expected no one to come to her. And Belinda Aylmer was stitching also,—by special order from her mother. The reader will remember that Lady Aylmer was not without strong hope that the engagement might even yet be broken off. Snubbing, she thought, might probably be efficacious to this purpose, and so Clara was to be snubbed.

Clara, who had just promised to do her best to gain Lady Aylmer's opinion, and who desired to be in some way true to her promise, though she thoroughly believed that her labour would be in vain, put on her pleasantest smile as she entered the room. Belinda, under the pressure of the circumstances, forgetting somewhat of her mother's injunctions, hurried to the door to welcome the stranger. Lady

Aylmer kept her chair, and even maintained her stitch, till Clara was half across the room. Then she got up, and, with great mastery over her voice, made her little speech.

“We are delighted to see you Miss Amedroz,” she said, putting out her hand,—of which Clara, however, felt no more than the finger.

“Quite delighted,” said Belinda, yielding a fuller grasp. Then there were affectionate greetings between Frederic and his mother and Frederic and his sister, during which Clara stood by, ill at ease. Captain Aylmer said not a word as to the footing on which his future wife had come to his father’s house. He did not ask his mother to receive her as another daughter, or his sister to take his Clara to her heart as a sister. There had been no word spoken of recognised intimacy. Clara knew that the Aylmers were cold people. She had learned as much as that from Captain Aylmer’s words to herself, and from his own manner. But she had not expected to be so frozen by them as was the case with her now.

In ten minutes she was sitting down with her bonnet still on, and Lady Aylmer was again at her stitches.

“Shall I show you your room?” said Belinda.

“Wait a moment, my dear,” said Lady Aylmer. “Frederic has gone to see if Sir Anthony is in his study.”

Sir Anthony was found in his study, and now made his appearance.

“So this is Clara Amedroz,” he said. “My dear, you are welcome to Aylmer Park.” This was so much better, that the kindness expressed,—though there was nothing special in it,—brought a tear into Clara’s eye, and almost made her love Sir Anthony.

“By the by, Sir Anthony have you seen Darvel? Darvel was wanting to see you especially about Nuggins. Nuggins says that he’ll take the bullocks now.” This was said by Lady Aylmer, and was skilfully arranged by her to put a stop to anything like enthusiasm on the part of Sir Anthony. Clara Amedroz had been invited to Aylmer Park,

and was to be entertained there, but it would not be expedient that she should be made to think that anybody was particularly glad to see her, or that the family was at all proud of the proposed connection. Within five minutes after this she was up in her room, and had received from Belinda tenders of assistance as to her lady's maid. Both the mother and daughter had been anxious to learn whether Clara would bring her own maid. Lady Aylmer, thinking that she would do so, had already blamed her for extravagance. "Of course Fred will have to pay for the journey and all the rest of it," she had said. But as soon as she had perceived that Clara had come without a servant, she had perceived that any young woman who travelled in that way must be unfit to be mated with her son. Clara, whose intelligence in such matters was sharp enough, assured Belinda that she wanted no assistance. "I dare say you think it very odd," she said, "but I really can dress myself." And when the maid did come to unpack the things, Clara would have sent her away at

once had she been able. But the maid, who was not a young woman, was obdurate. "Oh no, miss; my lady wouldn't be pleased. If you please, miss, I'll do it." And so the things were unpacked.

Clara was told that they dined at half-past seven, and she remained alone in her room till dinner-time, although it had not yet struck five when she had gone up-stairs. The maid had brought her a cup of tea, and she seated herself at her fire, turning over in her mind the different members of the household in which she found herself. It would never do. She told herself over and over again that it would never come to pass that that woman should be her mother-in-law, or that that other woman should be her sister. It was manifest to her that she was distasteful to them; and she had not lost a moment in assuring herself that they were distasteful to her. What purpose could it answer that she should strive,—not to like them, for no such strife was possible,—but to appear to like them? The whole place and everything about it was antipathetic to her.

Would it not be simply honest to Captain Aylmer that she should tell him so at once, and go away? Then she remembered that Frederic had not spoken to her a single word since she had been under his father's roof. What sort of welcome would have been accorded to her had she chosen to go down to Plaistow Hall?

At half-past seven she made her way by herself down-stairs. In this there was some difficulty, as she remembered nothing of the rooms below, and she could not at first find a servant. But a man at last did come to her in the hall, and by him she was shown into the drawing-room. Here she was alone for a few minutes. As she looked about her, she thought that no room she had ever seen had less of the comfort of habitation. It was not here that she had met Lady Aylmer before dinner. There had, at any rate, been in that other room work things, and the look of life which life gives to a room. But here there was no life. The furniture was all in its place, and everything was cold and grand and comfortless.

They were making company of her at Aylmer Park ! Clara was intelligent in such matters, and understood it all thoroughly.

Lady Aylmer was the first person to come to her. “I hope my maid has been with you,” said she ;—to which Clara muttered something intended for thanks. “You’ll find Richards a very clever woman, and quite a proper person.”

“I don’t at all doubt that.”

“She has been here a good many years, and has perhaps little ways of her own,—but she means to be obliging.”

“I shall give her very little trouble, Lady Aylmer. I am used to dress myself.” I am afraid this was not exactly true as to Clara’s past habits ; but she could dress herself, and intended to do so in future, and in this way justified the assertion to herself.

“You had better let Richards come to you, my dear, while you are here,” said Lady Aylmer, with a slight smile on her countenance which outraged Clara more even than the words. “We like to see young ladies nicely

dressed here.” To be told that she was to be nicely dressed because she was at Aylmer Park ! Her whole heart was already up in rebellion. Do her best to please Lady Aylmer ! It would be utterly impossible to her to make any attempt whatever in that direction. There was something in her ladyship’s eye,—a certain mixture of cunning, and power, and hardness in the slight smile that would gather round her mouth, by which Clara was revolted. She already understood much of Lady Aylmer, but in one thing she was mistaken. She thought that she saw simply the natural woman ; but she did, in truth, see the woman specially armed with an intention of being disagreeable, made up to give offence, and prepared to create dislike and enmity. At the present moment nothing further was said, as Captain Aylmer entered the room, and his mother immediately began to talk to him in whispers.

The two first days of Clara’s sojourn at Aylmer Park passed by without the occurrence of anything that was remarkable. That which most surprised and annoyed her, as regarded

her own position, was the coldness of all the people around her, as connected with the actual fact of her engagement. Sir Anthony was very courteous to her, but had never as yet once alluded to the fact that she was to become one of his family as his daughter-in-law. Lady Aylmer called her Miss Amedroz,—using the name with a peculiar emphasis, as though determined to show that Miss Amedroz was to be Miss Amedroz as far as any one at Aylmer Park was concerned,—and treated her almost as though her presence in the house was intrusive. Belinda was as cold as her mother in her mother's presence ; but when alone with Clara would thaw a little. She, in her difficulty, studiously avoided calling the new-comer by any name at all. As to Captain Aylmer, it was manifest to Clara that he was suffering almost more than she suffered herself. His position was so painful that she absolutely pitied him for the misery to which he was subjected by his own mother. They still called each other Frederic and Clara, and that was the only sign of special friendship which manifested

itself between them. And Clara, though she pitied him, could not but learn to despise him. She had hitherto given him credit at any rate for a will of his own. She had believed him to be a man able to act in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience. But now she perceived him to be so subject to his mother that he did not dare to call his heart his own. What was to be the end of it all? And if there could only be one end, would it not be well that that end should be reached at once, so that she might escape from her purgatory?

But on the afternoon of the third day there seemed to have come a change over Lady Aylmer. At lunch she was especially civil,—civil to the extent of picking out herself for Clara, with her own fork, the breast of a hashed fowl from a dish that was before her. This she did with considerable care,—I may say, with a show of care; and then, though she did not absolutely call Clara by her Christian name, she did call her “my dear.” Clara saw it all, and felt that the usual placidity of the afternoon would be broken by some special event. At

three o'clock, when the carriage as usual came to the door, Belinda was out of the way, and Clara was made to understand that she and Lady Aylmer were to be driven out without any other companion. "Belinda is a little busy, my dear. So, if you don't mind, we'll go alone." Clara of course assented, and got into the carriage with a conviction that now she would hear her fate. She was rather inclined to think that Lady Aylmer was about to tell her that she had failed in obtaining the approbation of Aylmer Park, and that she must be returned as goods of a description inferior to the order given. If such were the case, the breast of the chicken had no doubt been administered as consolation. Clara had endeavoured, since she had been at Aylmer Park, to investigate her own feelings in reference to Captain Aylmer; but had failed, and knew that she had failed. She wished to think that she loved him, as she could not endure the thought of having accepted a man whom she did not love. And she told herself that he had done nothing to forfeit her love. A woman who really loves

will hardly allow that her love should be forfeited by any fault. True love breeds forgiveness for all faults. And, after all, of what fault had Captain Aylmer been guilty? He had preached to her out of his mother's mouth. That had been all! She had first accepted him, and then rejected him, and then accepted him again; and now she would fain be firm, if firmness were only possible to her. Nevertheless, if she were told that she was to be returned as inferior, she would hold up her head under such disgrace as best she might, and would not let the tidings break her heart.

“My dear,” said Lady Aylmer, as soon as the trotting horses and rolling wheels made noise enough to prevent her words from reaching the servants on the box, “I want to say a few words to you;—and I think that this will be a good opportunity.”

“A very good opportunity,” said Clara.

“Of course, my dear, you are aware that I have heard of something going on between you and my son Frederic.” Now that Lady

Aylmer had taught herself to call Clara "my dear," it seemed that she could hardly call her so often enough.

"Of course I know that Captain Aylmer has told you of our engagement. But for that, I should not be here."

"I don't know how that might be," said Lady Aylmer; "but at any rate, my dear, he has told me that since the day of my sister's death there has been——in point of fact, a sort of engagement."

"I don't think Captain Aylmer has spoken of it in that way."

"In what way? Of course he has not said a word that was not nice and lover-like, and all that sort of thing. I believe he would have done anything in the world that his aunt had told him; and as to his——"

"Lady Aylmer!" said Clara, feeling that her voice was almost trembling with anger, "I am sure you cannot intend to be unkind to me?"

"Certainly not."

"Or to insult me?"

.

“ Insult you, my dear! You should not use such strong words, my dear; indeed you should not. Nothing of the kind is near my thoughts.”

“ If you disapprove of my marrying your son, tell me so at once, and I shall know what to do.”

“ It depends, my dear;—it depends on circumstances, and that is just why I want to speak to you.”

“ Then tell me the circumstances,—though indeed I think it would have been better if they could have been told to me by Captain Aylmer himself.”

“ There, my dear, you must allow me to judge. As a mother, of course I am anxious for my son. Now Frederic is a poor man. Considering the kind of society in which he has to live, and the position which he must maintain as a Member of Parliament, he is a very poor man.”

This was an argument which Clara certainly had not expected that any of the Aylmer family would condescend to use. She had

always regarded Captain Aylmer as a rich man since he had inherited Mrs. Winterfield's property, knowing that previously to that he had been able to live in London as rich men usually do live. "Is he?" said she. "It may seem odd to you, Lady Aylmer, but I do not think that a word has ever passed between me and your son as to the amount of his income."

"Not odd at all, my dear. Young ladies are always thoughtless about those things, and when they are looking to be married think that money will come out of the skies."

"If you mean that I have been looking to be married——

"Well;—expecting. I suppose you have been expecting it." Then she paused; but as Clara said nothing, she went on. "Of course, Frederic has got my sister's moiety of the Perivale property;—about eight hundred a year, or something of that sort, when all deductions are made. He will have the other moiety when I die, and if you and he can be

satisfied to wait for that event,—which may not perhaps be very long——” Then there was another pause, indicative of the melancholy natural to such a suggestion, during which Clara looked at Lady Aylmer, and made up her mind that her ladyship would live for the next twenty-five years at least. “If you can wait for that,” she continued, “it may be all very well, and though you will be poor people, in Frederic’s rank of life, you will be able to live.”

“That will be so far fortunate,” said Clara.

“But you’ll have to wait,” said Lady Aylmer, turning upon her companion almost fiercely. “That is, you certainly will have to do so if you are to depend upon Frederic’s income alone.”

“I have nothing of my own,—as he knows; absolutely nothing.”

“That does not seem to be quite so clear,” said Lady Aylmer, speaking now very cautiously,—or rather with a purpose of great caution; “I don’t think that that is quite so clear. Frederic has been telling me that there

seems to be some sort of a doubt about the settlement of the Belton estate."

"There is no sort of doubt whatsoever;—no shadow of a doubt. He is quite mistaken."

"Don't be in such a hurry, my dear. It is not likely that you yourself should be a very good lawyer."

"Lady Aylmer, I must be in a hurry lest there should be any mistake about this. There is no question here for lawyers. Frederic must have been misled by a word or two which I said to him with quite another purpose. Everybody concerned knows that the Belton estate goes to my cousin Will. My poor father was quite aware of it."

"That is all very well; and pray remember, my dear, that you need not attack me in this way. I am endeavouring, if possible, to arrange the accomplishment of your own wishes. It seems that Mr. Belton himself does not claim the property."

"There is no question of claiming. Because he is a man more generous than any other person in the world,—romantically generous,

he has offered to give me the property which was my father's for his lifetime ; but I do not suppose that you would wish, or that Captain Aylmer would wish, that I should accept such an offer as that." There was a tone in her voice as she said this, and a glance in her eye as she turned her face full upon her companion, which almost prevailed against Lady Aylmer's force of character.

"I really don't know, my dear," said Lady Aylmer. "You are so violent."

"I certainly am eager about this. No consideration on earth would induce me to take my cousin's property from him."

"It always seemed to me that that entail was a most unfair proceeding."

"What would it signify even if it were,—which it was not? Papa got certain advantages on those conditions. But what can all that matter? It belongs to Will Belton."

Then there was another pause, and Clara thought that that subject was over between them. But Lady Aylmer had not as yet

completed her purpose. "Shall I tell you, my dear, what I think you ought to do?"

"Certainly, Lady Aylmer; if you wish it."

"I can at any rate tell you what it would become any young lady to do under such circumstances. I suppose you will give me credit for knowing as much as that. Any young lady placed as you are would be recommended by her friends,—if she had friends able and fit to give her advice,—to put the whole matter into the hands of her natural friends and her lawyer together. Hear me out, my dear, if you please. At least you can do that for me, as I am taking a great deal of trouble on your behalf. You should let Frederic see Mr. Green. I understand that Mr. Green was your father's lawyer. And then Mr. Green can see Mr. Belton. And so the matter can be arranged. It seems to me, from what I hear, that in this way, and in this way only, something can be done as to the proposed marriage. In no other way can anything be done."

Then Lady Aylmer had finished her argu-

ment, and throwing herself back into the carriage, seemed to intimate that she desired no reply. She had believed and did believe that her guest was so intent upon marrying her son, that no struggle would be regarded as too great for the achievement of that object. And such belief was natural on her part. Mothers always so think of girls engaged to their sons, and so think especially when the girls are penniless, and the sons are well to do in the world. But such belief, though it is natural is sometimes wrong;—and it was altogether wrong in this instance. “Then,” said Clara, speaking very plainly, “nothing can be done.”

“Very well, my dear.”

After that there was not a word said between them till the carriage was once more within the park. Then Lady Aylmer spoke again. “I presume you see, my dear, that under these circumstances any thought of marriage between you and my son must be quite out of the question,—at any rate for a great many years.”

“I will speak to Captain Aylmer about it, Lady Aylmer.”

“Very well, my dear. So do. Of course he is his own master. But he is my son as well, and I cannot see him sacrificed without an effort to save him.”

When Clara came down to dinner on that day she was again Miss Amedroz, and she could perceive,—from Belinda’s manner quite as plainly as from that of her ladyship,—that she was to have no more tit-bits of hashed chicken specially picked out for her by Lady Aylmer’s own fork. That evening and the two next days passed, just as had passed the two first days, and everything was dull, cold, and uncomfortable. Twice she had walked out with Frederic, and on each occasion had thought that he would refer to what his mother had said; but he did not venture to touch upon the subject. Clara more than once thought that she would do so herself; but when the moments came she found that it was impossible. She could not bring herself to say anything that should have the appearance of a

desire on her part to hurry on a marriage. She could not say to him, "If you are too poor to be married,—or even if you mean to put forward that pretence, say so at once." He still called her Clara, and still asked her to walk with him, and still talked, when they were alone together, in a distant cold way, of the events of their future combined life. Would they live at Perivale? Would it be necessary to refurnish the house? Should he keep any of the land on his own hands? These are all interesting subjects of discussion between an engaged man and the girl to whom he is engaged; but the man, if he wish to make them thoroughly pleasant to the lady, should throw something of the urgency of a determined and immediate purpose into the discussion. Something should be said as to the actual destination of the rooms. A day should be fixed for choosing the furnishing. Or the gentleman should declare that he will at once buy the cows for the farm. But with Frederic Aylmer all discussions seemed to point to some cold, distant future, to which

Clara might look forward as she did to the joys of heaven. Will Belton would have bought the ring long since, and bespoken the priest, and arranged every detail of the honeymoon tour,—and very probably would have stood looking into a cradle shop with longing eyes.

At last there came an absolute necessity for some plain speaking. Captain Aylmer declared his intention of returning to London that he might resume his parliamentary duties. He had purposed to remain till after Easter, but it was found to be impossible. “I find I must go up to-morrow,” he said at breakfast. “They are going to make a stand about the Poor-rates, and I must be in the House in the evening.” Clara felt herself to be very cold and uncomfortable. As things were at present arranged she was to be left at Aylmer Park without a friend. And how long was she to remain there? No definite ending had been proposed for her visit. Something must be said and something settled before Captain Aylmer went away.

“You will come down for Easter, of course,” said his mother.

“Yes; I shall come down for Easter, I think,—or at any rate at Whitsuntide.”

“You must come at Easter, Frederic,” said his mother.

“I don’t doubt but I shall,” said he.

“Miss Amedroz should lay her commands upon him,” said Sir Anthony gallantly.

“Nonsense,” said Lady Aylmer.

“I have commands to lay upon him all the same,” said Clara; and if he will give me half an hour this morning he shall have them.” To this Captain Aylmer, of course, assented,—as how could he escape from such assent,—and a regular appointment was made. Captain Aylmer and Miss Amedroz were to be closeted together in the little back drawing-room immediately after breakfast. Clara would willingly have avoided any such formality could she have done so compatibly with the exigencies of the occasion. She had been obliged to assert herself when Lady Aylmer had rebuked Sir Anthony, and then Lady

Aylmer had determined that an air of business should be assumed. Clara, as she was marched off into the back drawing-room, followed by her lover with more sheep-like gait even than her own, felt strongly the absurdity and the wretchedness of her position. But she was determined to go through with her purpose.

“I am very sorry that I have to leave you so soon,” said Captain Aylmer as soon as the door was shut and they were alone together.

“Perhaps it may be better as it is Frederic ; as in this way we shall all come to understand each other, and something will be settled.”

“Well, yes ; perhaps that will be best.”

“Your mother has told me that she disapproves of our marriage.”

“No ; not that, I think. I don’t think she can have quite said that.”

“She says that you cannot marry while she is alive,—that is, that you cannot marry me because your income would not be sufficient.”

“I certainly was speaking to her about my income.”

“Of course I have got nothing.” Here she

paused. "Not a penny-piece in the world that I can call my own."

"Oh yes, you have."

"Nothing. Nothing!"

"You have your aunt's legacy?"

"No; I have not. She left me no legacy. But as that is between you and me, if we think of marrying each other, that would make no difference."

"None at all, of course."

"But in truth I have got nothing. Your mother said something to me about the Belton estate; as though there was some idea that possibly it might come to me."

"Your cousin himself seemed to think so."

"Frederic, do not let us deceive ourselves. There can be nothing of the kind. I could not accept any portion of the property from my cousin,—even though our marriage were to depend upon it."

"Of course it does not."

"But if your means are not sufficient for your wants I am quite ready to accept that

reason as being sufficient for breaking our engagement."

"There need be nothing of the kind."

"As for waiting for the death of another person,—for your mother's death, I should think it very wrong. Of course, if our engagement stands there need be no hurry; but—some time should be fixed." Clara as she said this felt that her face and forehead were suffused with a blush; but she was determined that it should be said, and the words were pronounced.

"I quite think so too," said he.

"I am glad that we agree. Of course, I will leave it to you to fix the time."

"You do not mean at this very moment?" said Captain Aylmer, almost aghast.

"No; I did not mean that."

"I'll tell you what. I'll make a point of coming down at Easter. I wasn't sure about it before, but now I will be. And then it shall be settled."

Such was the interview; and on the next morning Captain Aylmer started for London.

Accession No: 1030.
U.D.O. No: 8.32 / T.R.O.

Clara felt aware that she had not done or said all that should have been done and said ; but, nevertheless, a step in the right direction had been taken.

CHAPTER IV.

THE AYLMER PARK HASHED CHICKEN COMES
TO AN END.

EASTER in this year fell about the middle of April, and it still wanted three weeks of that time when Captain Aylmer started for London. Clara was quite alive to the fact that the next three weeks would not be a happy time for her. She looked forward, indeed, to so much wretchedness during this period, that the days as they came were not quite so bad as she had expected them to be. At first Lady Aylmer said little or nothing to her. It seemed, to be agreed between them that there was to be war, but that there was no necessity for any of the

actual operations of war during the absence of Captain Aylmer. Clara had become Miss Amedroz again; and though an offer to be driven out in the carriage was made to her every day, she was in general able to escape the infliction;—so that at last it came to be understood that Miss Amedroz did not like carriage exercise. “She has never been used to it,” said Lady Aylmer to her daughter. “I suppose not,” said Belinda; “but if she wasn’t so very cross she’d enjoy it just for that reason.” Clara sometimes walked about the grounds with Belinda, but on such occasions there was hardly anything that could be called conversation between them, and Frederic Aylmer’s name was never mentioned.

Captain Aylmer had not been gone many days before she received a letter from her cousin, in which he spoke with absolute certainty of his intention of giving up the estate. He had, he said, consulted Mr. Green, and the thing was to be done. “But it will be better, I think,” he went on to say, “that I should manage it for you till after your

marriage. I simply mean what I say. You are not to suppose that I shall interfere in any way afterwards. Of course there will be a settlement, as to which I hope you will allow me to see Mr. Green on your behalf." In the first draught of his letter he had inserted a sentence in which he expressed a wish that the property should be so settled that it might at last all come to some one bearing the name of Belton. But as he read this over, the condition,—for coming from him it would be a condition,—seemed to him to be ungenerous, and he expunged it. "What does it matter who has it," he said to himself bitterly, "or what he is called? I will never set my eyes upon his children, nor yet upon the place when he has become the master of it," Clara wrote both to her cousin and to the lawyer, repeating her assurance,—with great violence, as Lady Aylmer would have said,—that she would have nothing to do with the Belton estate. She told Mr. Green that it would be useless for him to draw up any deeds. "It can't be made mine unless I choose to have it," she said,

“and I don’t choose to have it.” Then there came upon her a terrible fear. What if she should marry Captain Aylmer after all; and what if he, when he should be her husband, should take the property on her behalf! Something must be done before her marriage to prevent the possibility of such results,—something as to the efficacy of which for such prevention she could feel altogether certain.

But could she marry Captain Aylmer at all in her present mood? During these three weeks she was unconsciously teaching herself to hope that she might be relieved from her engagement. She did not love him. She was becoming aware that she did not love him. She was beginning to doubt whether, in truth, she had ever loved him. But yet she felt that she could not escape from her engagement if he should show himself to be really actuated by any fixed purpose to carry it out; nor could she bring herself to be so weak before Lady Aylmer as to seem to yield. The necessity of not striking her colours was forced upon her by the warfare to which she was subjected. She

was unhappy, feeling that her present position in life was bad, and unworthy of her. She could have brought herself almost to run away from Aylmer Park, as a boy runs away from school, were it not that she had no place to which to run. She could not very well make her appearance at Plaistow Hall, and say that she had come there for shelter and succour. She could, indeed, go to Mrs. Askerton's cottage for awhile; and the more she thought of the state of her affairs, the more did she feel sure that that would, before long be her destiny. It must be her destiny,—unless Captain Aylmer should return at Easter with purposes so firmly fixed that even his mother should not be able to prevail against them.

And now, in these days, circumstances gave her a new friend,—or perhaps, rather, a new acquaintance, where she certainly had looked neither for the one or for the other. Lady Aylmer and Belinda and the carriage and the horses used, as I have said, to go off without her. This would take place soon after luncheon. Most of us know how the events of

the day drag themselves on tediously in such a country house as Aylmer Park,—a country house in which people neither read, nor flirt, nor gamble, nor smoke, nor have resort to the excitement of any special amusement. Lunch was on the table at half-past one, and the carriage was at the door at three. Eating and drinking and the putting on of bonnets occupied the hour and a half. From breakfast to lunch Lady Aylmer, with her old “front,” would occupy herself with her household accounts. For some days after Clara’s arrival she put on her new “front” before lunch; but of late,—since the long conversation in the carriage,—the new “front” did not appear till she came down for the carriage. According to the theory of her life, she was never to be seen by any but her own family in her old “front.” At breakfast she would appear with head so mysteriously enveloped,—with such a bewilderment of morning caps, that old “front” or new “front” was all the same. When Sir Anthony perceived this change,—when he saw that Clara was treated as though

she belonged to Aylmer Park, then he told himself that his son's marriage with Miss Amedroz was to be; and, as Miss Amedroz seemed to him to be a very pleasant young woman, he would creep out of his own quarters when the carriage was gone and have a little chat with her,—being careful to creep away again before her ladyship's return. This was Clara's new friend.

“Have you heard from Fred since he has been gone?” the old man asked one day, when he had come upon Clara still seated in the parlour in which they had lunched. He had been out, at the front of the house, scolding the under-gardener; but the man had taken away his barrow and left him, and Sir Anthony had found himself without employment.

“Only a line to say that he is to be here on the sixteenth.”

“I don't think people write so many love-letters as they did when I was young,” said Sir Anthony.

“To judge from the novels, I should think

not. The old novels used to be full of love-letters."

"Fred was never good at writing, I think."

"Members of Parliament have too much to do, I suppose," said Clara.

"But he always writes when there is any business. He's a capital man of business. I wish I could say as much for his brother,—or for myself."

"Lady Aylmer seems to like work of that sort."

"So she does. She's fond of it,—I am not. I sometimes think that Fred takes after her. Where was it you first knew him?"

"At Perivale. We used, both of us, to be staying with Mrs. Winterfield."

"Yes, yes; of course. The most natural thing in life. Well, my dear, I can assure you that I am quite satisfied."

"Thank you, Sir Anthony. I'm glad to hear you say even as much as that."

"Of course money is very desirable for a man situated like Fred; but he'll have enough, and if he is pleased, I am. Personally, as

regards yourself, I am more than pleased. I am indeed."

"It's very good of you to say so."

Sir Anthony looked at Clara, and his heart was softened towards her as he saw that there was a tear in her eye. A man's heart must be very hard when it does not become softened by the trouble of a woman with whom he finds himself alone. "I don't know how you and Lady Aylmer get on together," said he; "but it will not be my fault if we are not friends."

"I am afraid that Lady Aylmer does not like me," said Clara.

"Indeed. I was afraid there was something of that. But you must remember she is hard to please. You'll find she'll come round in time."

"She thinks that Captain Aylmer should not marry a woman without money."

"That's all very well; but I don't see why Fred shouldn't please himself. He's old enough to know what he wants."

"Is he, Sir Anthony? That's just the question. I'm not quite sure that he does know what he wants."

“Fred doesn’t know, do you mean?”

“I don’t quite think he does, sir. And the worst of it is, I am in doubt as well as he.”

“In doubt about marrying him?”

“In doubt whether it will be good for him or for any of us. I don’t like to come into a family that does not desire to have me.”

“You shouldn’t think so much of Lady Aylmer as all that, my dear.”

“But I do think a great deal of her.”

“I shall be very glad to have you as a daughter-in-law. And as for Lady Aylmer—between you and me, my dear, you shouldn’t take every word she says so much to heart. She’s the best woman in the world, and I’m sure I’m bound to say so. But she has her temper, you know; and I don’t think you ought to give way to her altogether. There’s the carriage. It won’t do you any good if we’re found together talking over it all; will it?” Then the baronet hobbled off, and Lady Aylmer, when she entered the room, found Clara sitting alone.

Whether it was that the wife was clever

enough to extract from her husband something of the conversation that had passed between him and Clara, or whether she had some other source of information,—or whether her conduct might proceed from other grounds, we need not inquire; but from that afternoon Lady Aylmer's manner and words to Clara became much less courteous than they had been before. She would always speak as though some great iniquity was being committed, and went about the house with a portentous frown, as though some terrible measure must soon be taken with the object of putting an end to the present extremely improper state of things. All this was so manifest to Clara, that she said to Sir Anthony one day that she could no longer bear the look of Lady Aylmer's displeasure,—and that she would be forced to leave Aylmer Park before Frederic's return, unless the evil were mitigated. She had by this time told Sir Anthony that she much doubted whether the marriage would be possible, and that she really believed that it would be best for all parties that the

idea should be abandoned. Sir Anthony, when he heard this could only shake his head and hobble away. The trouble was too deep for him to cure.

But Clara still held on; and now there wanted but two days to Captain Aylmer's return, when, all suddenly, there arose a terrible storm at Aylmer Park, and then came a direct and positive quarrel between Lady Aylmer and Clara,—a quarrel direct and positive, and, on the part of both ladies, very violent.

Nothing had hitherto been said at Aylmer Park about Mrs. Askerton,—nothing, that is, since Clara's arrival. And Clara had been thankful for this silence. The letter which Captain Aylmer had written to her about Mrs. Askerton will perhaps be remembered, and Clara's answer to that letter. The Aylmer Park opinion as to this poor woman, and as to Clara's future conduct towards the poor woman, had been expressed very strongly; and Clara had as strongly resolved that she would not be guided by Aylmer Park opinions in that matter. She had anticipated much

that was disagreeable on this subject, and had therefore congratulated herself not a little on the absence of all allusion to it. But Lady Aylmer had, in truth, kept Mrs. Askerton in reserve, as a battery to be used against Miss Amedroz if all other modes of attack should fail,—as a weapon which would be powerful when other weapons had been powerless. For awhile she had thought it possible that Clara might be the owner of the Belton estate, and then it had been worth the careful mother's while to be prepared to accept a daughter-in-law so dowered. We have seen how the question of such ownership had enabled her to put forward the plea of poverty which she had used on her son's behalf. But since that Frederic had declared his intention of marrying the young woman in spite of his poverty, and Clara seemed to be equally determined. "He has been fool enough to speak the word, and she is determined to keep him if it is to it," said Lady Aylmer to her daughter. I Therefore the Askerton battery was brought into use to bear,—not altogether unsuccessfully. now

The three ladies were sitting together in the drawing-room, and had been as mute as fishes for an half an hour. In these sittings they were generally very silent, speaking only in short little sentences. "Will you drive with us to-day, Miss Amedroz?" "Not to-day, I think, Lady Aylmer." "As you are reading, perhaps you won't mind our leaving you?" "Pray do not put yourself to inconvenience for me, Miss Aylmer." Such and such like was their conversation; but on a sudden after a full half-hour's positive silence, Lady Aylmer asked a question altogether of another kind. "I think, Miss Amedroz, my son wrote to you about a certain Mrs. Asker-n?"

Clara put down her work and sat for a moment almost astonished. It was not only that Lady Aylmer had asked so very disagreeable a question, but that she had asked it with so peculiar a voice,—a voice as it were a command, in a manner that was evidently intended to be taken as serious, and with a look of authority in her eye, as though she were

resolved that this battery of her's should knock the enemy absolutely in the dust! Belinda gave a little spring in her chair, looked intently at her work, and went on stitching faster than before. "Yes he did," said Clara, finding that an answer was imperatively demanded from her.

"It was quite necessary that he should write. I believe it to be an undoubted fact that Mrs. Askerton is,—is,—is,—not at all what she ought to be."

"Which of us is what we ought to be?" said Clara.

"Miss Amedroz, on this subject I am not at all inclined to joke. Is it not true that Mrs. Askerton——"

"You must excuse me, Lady Aylmer, but what I know of Mrs. Askerton, I know altogether in confidence; so that I cannot speak to you of her past life."

"But, Miss Amedroz, pray excuse me if I say that I must speak of it. When I remember the position in which you do us the honour of being our visitor here, how

can I help speaking of it?" Belinda was stitching very hard, and would not even raise her eyes. Clara, who still held her needle in her hand, resumed her work, and for a moment or two made no further answer. But Lady Aylmer had by no means completed her task. "Miss Amedroz," she said, "you must allow me to judge for myself in this matter. The subject is one on which I feel myself obliged to speak to you."

"But I have got nothing to say about it."

"You have, I believe, admitted the truth of the allegations made by us as to this woman." Clara was becoming very angry. A red spot showed itself on each cheek, and a frown settled upon her brow. She did not as yet know what she would say or how she would conduct herself. She was striving to consider how best she might assert her own independence. But she was fully determined that in this matter she would not bend an inch to Lady Aylmer. "I believe we may take that as admitted?" said her ladyship.

"I am not aware that I have admitted

anything to you, Lady Aylmer, or said anything that can justify you in questioning me on the subject."

"Justify me in questioning a young woman who tells me that she is to be my future daughter-in-law!"

"I have not told you so. I have never told you anything of the kind."

"Then on what footing, Miss Amedroz, do you do us the honour of being with us here at Aylmer Park?"

"On a very foolish footing."

"On a foolish footing! What does that mean?"

"It means that I have been foolish in coming to a house in which I am subjected to such questioning."

"Belinda, did you ever hear anything like this? Miss Amedroz, I must persevere, however much you may dislike it. The story of this woman's life,—whether she be Mrs. Askerton or not, I don't know——"

"She is Mrs. Askerton," said Clara.

"As to that I do not profess to know, and

I dare say that you are no wiser than myself. But what she has been we do know." Here Lady Aylmer raised her voice and continued to speak with all the eloquence which assumed indignation could give her. "What she has been we do know, and I ask you, as a duty which I owe to my son, whether you have put an end to your acquaintance with so very disreputable a person,—a person whom even to have known is a disgrace?"

"I know her, and——"

"Stop one minute, if you please. My questions are these—Have you put an end to that acquaintance? And are you ready to give a promise that it shall never be resumed?"

"I have not put an end to that acquaintance,—or rather that affectionate friendship as I should call it, and I am ready to promise that it shall be maintained with all my heart."

"Belinda, do you hear her?"

"Yes, mamma." And Belinda slowly shook her head, which was now bowed lower than ever over her lap.

“ And that is your resolution ?”

“ Yes, Lady Aylmer ; that is my resolution.”

“ And you think that becoming to you, as a young woman ?”

“ Just so ; I think that becoming to me,—as a young woman.”

“ Then let me tell you, Miss Amedroz, that I differ from you altogether,—altogether.” Lady Aylmer, as she repeated the last word, raised her folded hands as though she were calling upon heaven to witness how thoroughly she differed from the young woman !

“ I don’t see how I am to help that, Lady Aylmer. I dare say we may differ on many subjects.”

“ I dare say we do. I dare say we do. And I need not point out to you how very little that would be a matter of regret to me, but for the hold you have upon my unfortunate son.”

“ Hold upon him, Lady Aylmer ! How dare you insult me by such language ?” Here-upon Belinda again jumped in her chair ; but

Lady Aylmer looked as though she enjoyed the storm.

“ You undoubtedly have a hold upon him, Miss Amedroz, and I think that it is a great misfortune. Of course, when he hears what your conduct is with reference to this—person, he will release himself from his entanglement.”

“ He can release himself from his entanglement whenever he chooses,” said Clara, rising from her chair. “ Indeed, he is released. I shall let Captain Aylmer know that our engagement must be at an end, unless he will promise that I shall never in future be subjected to the unwarrantable insolence of his mother.” Then she walked off to the door, not regarding, and indeed not hearing, the parting shot that was fired at her.

And now what was to be done! Clara went up to her own room, making herself strong and even comfortable, with an inward assurance that nothing should ever induce her even to sit down to table again with Lady Aylmer. She would not willingly enter the

same room with Lady Aylmer, or have any speech with her. But what should she at once do? She could not very well leave Aylmer Park without settling whither she would go; nor could she in any way manage to leave the house on that afternoon. She almost resolved that she would go to Mrs. Askerton. Everything was of course over between her and Captain Aylmer, and therefore there was no longer any hindrance to her doing so on that score. But what would be her cousin Will's wish? He, now, was the only friend to whom she could trust for good council. What would be his advice? Should she write and ask him? No;—she could not do that. She could not bring herself to write to him, telling him that the Aylmer “entanglement” was at an end. Were she to do so, he, with his temperament, would take such letter as meaning much more than it was intended to mean. But she would write a letter to Captain Aylmer. This she thought that she would do at once, and she began it. She got as far as “My dear Captain Aylmer,”

and then she found that the letter was one which could not be written very easily. And she remembered, as the greatness of the difficulty of writing the letter become plain to her, that it could not now be sent so as to reach Captain Aylmer before he would leave London. If written at all, it must be addressed to him at Aylmer Park, and the task might be done to-morrow as well as to-day. So that task was given up for the present.

But she did write a letter to Mrs. Askerton,—a letter which she would send or not on the morrow, according to the state of her mind as it might then be. In this she declared her purpose of leaving Aylmer Park on the day after Captain Aylmer's arrival, and asked to be taken in at the cottage. An answer was to be sent to her, addressed to the Great Northern Railway Hotel.

Richards, the maid, came up to her before dinner, with offers of assistance for dressing,—offers made in a tone which left no doubt on Clara's mind that Richards knew all about the

quarrel. But Clara declined to be dressed, and sent down a message saying that she would remain in her room, and begging to be supplied with tea. She would not even condescend to say that she was troubled with a headache. Then Belinda came up to her, just before dinner was announced, and with a fluttered gravity advised Miss Amedroz to come downstairs. "Mamma thinks it will be much better that you should show yourself, let the final result be what it may."

"But I have not the slightest desire to show myself."

"There are the servants, you know."

"But, Miss Aylmer, I don't care a straw for the servants ;—really not a straw."

"And papa will feel it so."

"I shall be sorry if Sir Anthony is annoyed ;—but I cannot help it. It has not been my doing."

"And mamma says that my brother would of course wish it."

"After what your mother has done, I don't see what his wishes would have to do with it,

—even if she knew them,—which I don't think she does.”

“But if you will think of it, I'm sure you'll find it is the proper thing to do. There is nothing to be avoided so much as an open quarrel, that all the servants can see.”

“I must say, Miss Aylmer, that I disregard the servants. After what passed down-stairs, of course I have had to consider what I should do. Will you tell your mother that I will stay here, if she will permit it.”

“Of course. She will be delighted.”

“I will remain, if she will permit it, till the morning after Captain Aylmer's arrival. Then I shall go.”

“Where to, Miss Amedroz?”

“I have already written to a friend, asking her to receive me.”

Miss Aylmer paused a moment before she asked her next question;—but she did ask it, showing by her tone and manner that she had been driven to summon up all her courage to enable her to do so. “To what friend, Miss Amedroz? Mamma will be glad to know.”

“That is a question which Lady Aylmer can have no right to ask,” said Clara.

“Oh ;—very well. Of course, if you don’t like to tell, there’s no more to be said.”

“I do not like to tell, Miss Aylmer.”

Clara had her tea in her room that evening, and lived there the whole of the next day. The family down-stairs was not comfortable. Sir Anthony could not be made to understand why his guest kept her room,—which was not odd, as Lady Aylmer was very sparing in the information she gave him ; and Belinda found it to be impossible to sit at table, or to say a few words to her father and mother, without showing at every moment her consciousness that a crisis had occurred. By the next day’s post the letter to Mrs. Askerton was sent, and at the appointed time Captain Aylmer arrived. About an hour after he entered the house, Belinda went up-stairs with a message from him ;—would Miss Amedroz see him ? Miss Amedroz would see him, but made it a condition of doing so that she should not be required to meet Lady Aylmer. “She need not be afraid,”

said Lady Aylmer. "Unless she sends me a full apology, with a promise that she will have no further intercourse whatever with that woman, I will never willingly see her again." A meeting was therefore arranged between Captain Aylmer and Miss Amedroz in a sitting-room up-stairs.

"What is all this, Clara?" said Captain Aylmer, at once.

"Simply this,—that your mother has insulted me most wantonly."

"She says that it is you who have been uncourteous to her."

"Be it so ;—you can of course believe whichever you please, and it is desirable, no doubt, that you should prefer to believe your mother."

"But I do not wish there to be any quarrel."

"But there is a quarrel, Captain Aylmer, and I must leave your father's house. I cannot stay here after what has taken place. Your mother told me ;—I cannot tell you what she told me, but she made against me just those

accusations which she knew it would be the hardest for me to bear."

"I'm sure you have mistaken her."

"No; I have not mistaken her."

"And where do you propose to go?"

"To Mrs. Askerton."

"Oh, Clara!"

"I have written to Mrs. Askerton to ask her to receive me for awhile. Indeed, I may almost say that I had no other choice."

"If you go there, Clara, there will be an end to everything."

"And there must be an end of what you call everything, Captain Aylmer," said she, smiling. "It cannot be for your good to bring into your family a wife of whom your mother would think so badly as she thinks of me."

There was a great deal said, and Captain Aylmer walked very often up and down the room, endeavouring to make some arrangement which might seem in some sort to appease his mother. Would Clara only allow a telegram to be sent to Mrs. Askerton, to explain that she had changed her mind? But Clara would

allow no such telegram to be sent, and on that evening she packed up all her things. Captain Aylmer saw her again and again, sending Belinda backwards and forwards, and making different appointments up to midnight; but it was all to no purpose, and on the next morning she took her departure alone in the Aylmer Park carriage for the railway station. Captain Aylmer had proposed to go with her; but she had so stoutly declined his company that he was obliged to abandon his intention. She saw neither of the ladies on that morning, but Sir Anthony came out to say a word of farewell to her in the hall. "I am very sorry for all this," said he. "It is a pity," said Clara, "but it cannot be helped. Good-bye, Sir Anthony." "I hope we may meet again under pleasanter circumstances," said the baronet. To this Clara made no reply, and was then handed into the carriage by Captain Aylmer.

"I am so bewildered," said he, "that I cannot now say anything definite, but I shall write to you, and probably follow you."

“Do not follow me, pray, Captain Aylmer,” said she. Then she was driven to the station ; and as she passed through the lodges of the park entrance she took what she intended to be a final farewell of Aylmer Park.

CHAPTER V.

ONCE MORE BACK TO BELTON.

WHEN the carriage was driven away, Sir Anthony and Captain Aylmer were left standing alone at the hall door of the house. The servants had slunk off, and the father and son, looking at each other, felt that they also must slink away, or else have some words together on the subject of their guest's departure. The younger gentleman would have preferred that there should be no words, but Sir Anthony was curious to know something of what had passed in the house during the last few days. "I'm afraid things are not going quite comfortable," he said.

“It seems to me, sir,” said his son, “that things very seldom do go quite comfortable.”

“But, Fred,—what is it all about? Your mother says that Miss Amedroz is behaving very badly.”

“And Miss Amedroz says that my mother is behaving very badly.”

“Of course ;—that’s only natural. And what do you say?”

“I say nothing, sir. The less said the soonest mended.”

“That’s all very well ; but it seems to me that you, in your position, must say something. The long and the short of it is this. Is she to be your wife?”

“Upon my word, sir, I don’t know.”

They were still standing out under the portico, and as Sir Anthony did not for a minute or two ask any further questions, Captain Aylmer turned as though he were going into the house. But his father had still a word or two to say. “Stop a moment, Fred. I don’t often trouble you with advice.”

“I’m sure I’m always glad to hear it when you offer any.”

“I know very well that in most things your opinion is better than mine. You’ve had advantages which I never had. But I’ve had more experience than you, my dear boy. It stands to reason that in some things I must have had more experience than you.” There was a tone of melancholy in the father’s voice as he said this which quite touched his son, and which brought the two closer together out in the porch. “Take my word for it,” continued Sir Anthony, “that you are much better off as you are than you could be with a wife.”

“Do you mean to say that no man should marry?”

“No;—I don’t mean to say that. An eldest son ought to marry, so that the property may have an heir. And poor men should marry, I suppose, as they want wives to do for them. And sometimes, no doubt a man must marry—when he has got to be very fond of a girl, and has compromised himself, and all that kind of

thing. I would never advise any man to sully his honour." As Sir Anthony said this he raised himself a little with his two sticks and spoke out in a bolder voice. The voice however, sank again as he descended from the realms of honour to those of prudence. "But none of these cases are yours, Fred. To be sure you'll have the Perivale property; but that is not a family estate, and you'll be much better off by turning it into money. And in the way of comfort, you can be a great deal more comfortable without a wife than you can with one. What do you want a wife for? And then, as to Miss Amedroz,—for myself I must say that I like her uncommonly. She has been very pleasant in her ways with me. But,—somehow or another, I don't think you are so much in love with her but what you can do without her." Hereupon he paused and looked his son full in the face. Fred had also been thinking of the matter in his own way, and asking himself the same question,—whether he was in truth so much in love with Clara that he could not live without her.

“Of course I don’t know,” continued Sir Anthony, “what has taken place just now between you and her, or what between her and your mother; but I suppose the whole thing might fall through without any further trouble to you,—or without anything unhand-some on your part?” But Captain Aylmer still said nothing. The whole thing, might, no doubt, fall through, but he wished to be neither unjust nor ungenerous,—and he specially wished to avoid anything unhand-some. After a further pause of a few minutes, Sir Anthony went on again, pouring forth the words of experience. “Of course marriage is all very well. I married rather early in life, and have always found your mother to be a most excellent woman. A better woman doesn’t breathe. I’m as sure of that as I am of anything. But God bless me,—of course you can see. I can’t call anything my own: I’m tied down here and I can’t move. I’ve never got a shilling to spend, while all these lazy hounds about the place are eating me up. There isn’t a clerk with

a hundred a year in London that isn't better off than I am as regards ready money. And what comfort have I in a big house, and no end of gardens, and a place like this? What pleasures do I get out of it? That comes of marrying and keeping up one's name in the county respectably! What do I care for the county? D—— the county! I often wish that I'd been a younger son,—as you are."

Captain Aylmer had no answer to make to all this. It was, no doubt, the fact that age and good living had made Sir Anthony altogether incapable of enjoying the kind of life which he desiderated, and that he would probably have eaten and drunk himself into his grave long since had that kind of life been within his reach. This, however, the son could not explain to the father. But in fitting, as he endeavoured to do, his father's words to his own case, Captain Aylmer did perceive that a bachelor's life might perhaps be the most suitable to his own peculiar case. Only he would do nothing unhandsome. As

to that he was quite resolved. Of course Clara must show herself to be in some degree amenable to reason and to the ordinary rules of the world; but he was aware that his mother was hot-tempered, and he generously made up his mind that he would give Miss Amedroz even yet another chance.

At the hotel in London Clara found a short note from Mrs. Askerton, in which she was warmly assured that everything should be done to make her comfortable at the cottage as long as she should wish to stay there. But the very warmth of affection thus expressed made her almost shrink from what she was about to do. Mrs. Askerton was no doubt anxious for her coming; but would her cousin Will Belton approve of the visit; and what would her cousin Mary say about it? If she was being driven into this step against her own approval, by the insolence of Lady Aylmer,—if she was doing this thing simply because Lady Aylmer had desired her not to do it, and was doing it in opposition to the wishes of the man she had promised to marry as well

as to her own judgment, there could not but be cause for shrinking. And yet she believed that she was right. If she could only have had some one to tell her,—some one in whom she could trust implicitly to direct her! She had hitherto been very much prone to rebel against authority. Against her aunt she had rebelled, and against her father, and against her lover. But now she wished with all her heart that there might be some one to whom she could submit with perfect faith. If she could only know what her cousin Will would think. In him she thought she could have trusted with that perfect faith;—if only he would have been a brother to her.

But it was too late now for doubting, and on the next day she found herself getting out of the old Redicote fly, at Colonel Askerton's door. He came out to meet her, and his greeting was very friendly. Hitherto there had been no great intimacy between him and her, owing rather to the manner of life adopted by him than to any cause of mutual dislike between them. Mrs. Askerton had

shown herself desirous of some social intercourse since she had been at Belton, but with Colonel Askerton there had been nothing of this. He had come there intending to live alone, and had been satisfied to carry out his purpose. But now Clara had come to his house as a guest, and he assumed towards her altogether a new manner. "We are so glad to have you," he said, taking both her hands. Then she passed on into the cottage, and in a minute was in her friend's arms.

"Dear Clara ;—dearest Clara, I am so glad to have you here."

"It is very good of you."

"No, dear ; the goodness is with you to come. But we won't quarrel about that. We will both be ever so good. And he is so happy that you should be here. You'll get to know him now. But come up-stairs. There's a fire in your room, and I'll be your maid for the occasion,—because then we can talk." Clara did as she was bid and went up-stairs ; and as she sat over the fire while her friend knelt beside her,—for Mrs. Askerton was

given to such kneelings,—she could not but tell herself that Belton Cottage was much more comfortable than Aylmer Park. During the whole time of her sojourn at Aylmer Park no word of real friendship had once greeted her ears. Everything there had been cold and formal, till coldness and formality had given way to violent insolence.

“And so you have quarrelled with her ladyship,” said Mrs. Askerton. “I knew you would.”

“I have not said anything about quarrelling with her.”

“But of course you have. Come, now; don’t make yourself disagreeable. You have had a downright battle;—have you not?”

“Something very like it, I’m afraid.”

“I am so glad,” said Mrs. Askerton, rubbing her hands.

“That is ill-natured.”

“Very well. Let it be ill-natured. One isn’t to be good-natured all round, or what would be the use of it? And what sort of woman is she?”

“Oh dear ; I couldn’t describe her. She is very large, and wears a great wig, and manages everything herself, and I’ve no doubt she’s a very good woman in her own way.”

“I can see her at once ;—and a very pillar of virtue as regards morality and going to church. Poor me ! Does she know that you have come here ?”

“I have no doubt she does. I did not tell her, nor would I tell her daughter ; but I told Captain Aylmer.”

“That was right. That was very right. I’m so glad of that. But who would doubt that you would show a proper spirit ? And what did he say ?”

“Not much, indeed.”

“I won’t trouble you about him. I don’t in the least doubt but all that will come right. And what sort of man is Sir Anthony ?”

“A common-place sort of a man ; very gouty, and with none of his wife’s strength. I liked him the best of them all.”

“Because you saw the least of him, I suppose.”

“He was kind in his manner to me.”

“And they were like she-dragons. I understand it all, and can see them just as though I had been there. I felt that I knew what would come of it when you first told me that you were going to Aylmer Park. I did, indeed. I could have prophesied it all.”

“What a pity you did not.”

“It would have done no good;—and your going there has done good. It has opened your eyes to more than one thing, I don’t doubt. But tell me,—have you told them in Norfolk that you were coming here?”

“No;—I have not written to my cousin.”

“Don’t be angry with me if I tell you something. I have.”

“Have what?”

“I have told Mr. Belton that you were coming here. It was in this way. I had to write to him about our continuing in the cottage. Colonel Askerton always makes me write if it’s possible, and of course we were obliged to settle something as to the place.”

“I’m sorry you said anything about me.”

“How could I help it? What would you have thought of me, or what would he have thought, if, when writing to him, I had not mentioned such a thing as your visit? Besides, it’s much better that he should know.”

“I am sorry that you said anything about it.”

“You are ashamed that he should know that you are here,” said Mrs. Askerton, in a tone of reproach.

“Ashamed! No; I am not ashamed. But I would sooner that he had not been told,—as yet. Of course he would have been told before long.”

“But you are not angry with me?”

“Angry! How can I be angry with any one who is so kind to me?”

That evening passed by very pleasantly, and when she went again to her own room, Clara was almost surprised to find how completely she was at home. On the next day she and Mrs. Askerton together went up to the house, and roamed through all the rooms, and Clara seated herself in all the accustomed chairs.

On the sofa, just in the spot to which Belton had thrown it, she found the key of the cellar. She took it up in her hand, thinking that she would give it to the servant; but again she put it back upon the sofa. It was his key, and he had left it there, and if ever there came an occasion she would remind him where he had put it. Then they went out to the cow, who was at her ease in a little home paddock.

“Dear Bessy,” said Clara. “See how well she knows me.” But I think the tame little beast would have known any one else as well who had gone up to her as Clara did, with food in her hand. “She is quite as sacred as any cow that ever was worshipped among the cow-worshippers,” said Mrs. Askerton. “I suppose they milk her and sell the butter, but otherwise she is not regarded as an ordinary cow at all.” “Poor Bessy,” said Clara. “I wish she had never come here. What is to be done with her?” “Done with her! She’ll stay here till she dies a natural death, and then a romantic pair of mourners will follow

her to her grave, mixing their sympathetic tears comfortably as they talk of the old days; and in future years, Bessy will grow to be a divinity of the past, never to be mentioned without tenderest reminiscences. I have not the slightest difficulty in prophesying as to Bessy's future life and posthumous honours." They roamed about the place the whole morning, through the garden and round the farm buildings, and in and out of the house; and at every turn something was said about Will Belton. But Clara would not go up to the rocks, although Mrs. Askerton more than once attempted to turn in that direction. He had said that he never would go there again except under certain circumstances. She knew that those circumstances would never come to pass; but yet neither would she go there. She would never go there till her cousin was married. Then, if in those days she should ever be present at Belton Castle, she would creep up to the spot all alone, and allow herself to think of the old days.

On the following morning there came to her

a letter bearing the Downham post-mark,—but at the first glance she knew that it was not from her cousin Will. Will wrote with a bold round hand, that was extremely plain and caligraphic when he allowed himself time for the work in hand, as he did with the commencement of his epistles, but which would become confused and altogether anti-caligraphic when he fell into a hurry towards the end of his performance,—as was his wont. But the address of this letter was written in a pretty, small, female hand,—very careful in the perfection of every letter, and very neat in every stroke. It was from Mary Belton, between whom and Clara there had never hitherto been occasion for correspondence. The letter was as follows:—

“ Plaistow Hall, April, 186—.

“ MY DEAR COUSIN CLARA,

“ William has heard from your friends at Belton, who are tenants on the estate, and as to whom there seems to be some question

whether they are to remain. He has written, saying, I believe, that there need be no difficulty if they wish to stay there. But we learn, also, from Mrs. Askerton's letter, that you are expected at the cottage, and therefore I will address this to Belton, supposing that it may find you there.

“ You and I have never yet known each other ;—which has been a grief to me ; but this grief, I hope, may be cured some day before long. I myself, as you know, am such a poor creature that I cannot go about the world to see my friends as other people do ;—at least, not very well ; and therefore I write to you with the object of asking you to come and see me here. This is an interesting old house in its way ; and though I must not conceal from you that life here is very, very quiet, I would do my best to make the days pass pleasantly with you. I had heard that you were gone to Aylmer Park. Indeed, William told me of his taking you up to London. Now it seems you have left Yorkshire, and I suppose you will not return there

very soon. If it be so, will it not be well that you should come to me for a short time?

“Both William and I feel that just for the present,—for a little time,—you would perhaps prefer to be alone with me. He must go to London for awhile, and then on to Belton, to settle your affairs and his. He intends to be absent for six weeks. If you would not be afraid of the dullness of this house for so long a time, pray come to us. The pleasure to me would be very great, and I hope that you have some of that feeling, which with me is so strong, that we ought not to be any longer personally strangers to each other. You could then make up your mind as to what you would choose to do afterwards. I think that by the end of that time,—that is, when William returns,—my uncle and aunt from Sleaford will be with us. He is a clergyman, you know; and if you then like to remain, they will be delighted to make your acquaintance.

“It seems to be a long journey for a young lady to make alone, from Belton to Plaistow; but travelling is so easy now-a-days, and

young ladies seem to be so independent, that you may be able to manage it. Hoping to see you soon, I remain

“Your affectionate Cousin,

“MARY BELTON.”

This letter she received before breakfast, and was therefore able to read it in solitude, and to keep its receipt from the knowledge of Mrs. Askerton, if she should be so minded. She understood at once all that it intended to convey,—a hint that Plaistow Hall would be a better resting place for her than Mrs. Askerton's cottage; and an assurance that if she would go to Plaistow Hall for her convenience, no advantage should be taken of her presence there by the owner of the house for his convenience. As she sat thinking of the offer which had been made to her she fancied that she could see and hear her cousin Will as he discussed the matter with his sister, and with a half assumption of surliness declared his own intention of going away. Captain Aylmer after that interview in London had spoken

of Belton's conduct as being unpardonable; but Clara had not only pardoned him, but had, in her own mind, pronounced his virtues to be so much greater than his vices as to make him almost perfect. "But I will not drive him out of his own house," she said. "What does it matter where I go?"

"Colonel Askerton has had a letter from your cousin," said Mrs. Askerton as soon as the two ladies were alone together.

"And what does he say?"

"Not a word about you."

"So much the better. I have given him trouble enough, and am glad to think that he should be free of me for awhile. Is Colonel Askerton to stay at the cottage?"

"Now, Clara, you are a hypocrite. You know that you are a hypocrite."

"Very likely,—but I don't know why you should accuse me just now."

"Yes, you do. Have not you heard from Norfolk also?"

"Yes;—I have."

"I was sure of it. I knew he would never

have written in that way, in answer to my letter, ignoring your visit here altogether, unless he had written to you also."

"But he has not written to me. My letter is from his sister. There it is." Whereupon she handed the letter to Mrs. Askerton, and waited patiently while it was being read. Her friend returned it to her without a word, and Clara was the first to speak again. "It is a nice letter, is it not? I never saw her you know."

"So she says."

"But is it not a kind letter?"

"I suppose it is meant for kindness. It is not very complimentary to me. It presumes that such a one as I may be treated without the slightest consideration. And so I may. It is only fit that I should be so treated. If you ask my advice, I advise you to go at once; —at once."

"But I have not asked your advice, dear; nor do I intend to ask it."

"You would not have shown it me if you had not intended to go."

“How unreasonable you are! You told me just now that I was a hypocrite for not telling you of my letter, and now you are angry with me because I have shown it you.”

“I am not angry. I think you have been quite right to show it me. I don’t know how else you could have acted upon it.”

“But I do not mean to act upon it. I shall not go to Plaistow. There are two reasons against it, each sufficient. I shall not leave you just yet,—unless you send me away; and I shall not cause my cousin to be turned out of his own house.”

“Why should he be turned out? Why should you not go to him? You love him;—and as for him, he is more in love than any man I ever knew. Go to Plaistow Hall, and everything will run smooth.”

“No, dear; I shall not do that.”

“Then you are foolish. I am bound to tell you so, as I have inveigled you here.”

“I thought I had invited myself.”

“No; I asked you to come, and when I asked you I knew that I was wrong. Though

I meant to be kind, I knew that I was unkind. I saw that my husband disapproved it, though he had not the heart to tell me so. I wish he had. I wish he had."

"Mrs. Askerton, I cannot tell you how much you wrong yourself, and how you wrong me also. I am more than contented to be here."

"But you should not be contented to be here. It is just that. In learning to love me,—or rather, perhaps, to pity me, you lower yourself. Do you think that I do not see it all, and know it all? Of course it is bad to be alone, but I have no right not to be alone." There was nothing for Clara to do but to draw herself once again close to the poor woman, and to embrace her with protestations of fair, honest, equal regard and friendship. "Do you think I do not understand that letter?" continued Mrs. Askerton. "If it had come from Lady Aylmer I could have laughed at it, because I believe Lady Aylmer to be an overbearing virago, whom it is good to put down in every way possible. But this comes from a pure-minded woman, one whom I believe to be little

given to harsh judgments on her fellow-sinners ; and she tells you, in her calm wise way, that it is bad for you to be here with me."

"She says nothing of the kind."

"But does she not mean it? Tell me honestly ;—do you not know that she means it?"

"I am not to be guided by what she means."

"But you are to be guided by what her brother means. It is to come to that, and you may as well bend your neck at once. It is to come to that, and the sooner the better for you. It is easy to see that you are badly off for guidance when you take up me as your friend." When she had so spoken Mrs. Askerton got up and went to the door. "No, Clara, do not come with me ; not now," she said, turning to her companion, who had risen as though to follow her. "I will come to you soon, but I would rather be alone now. And, look here, dear ; you must answer your cousin's letter. Do so at once, and say that you will go to Plais-tow. In any event it will be better for you."

Clara, when she was alone, did answer her

cousin's letter, but she did not accept the invitation that had been given her. She assured Miss Belton that she was most anxious to know her, and hoped that she might do so before long, either at Plaistow or at Belton; but that at present she was under an engagement to stay with her friend Mrs. Askerton. In an hour or two Mrs. Askerton returned, and Clara handed to her the note to read. "Then all I can say is you are very silly, and don't know on which side your bread is buttered." It was evident from Mrs. Askerton's voice that she had recovered her mood and tone of mind. "I don't suppose it will much signify, as it will all come right at last," she said afterwards. And then, after luncheon, when she had been for a few minutes with her husband in his own room, she told Clara that the Colonel wanted to speak to her. "You'll find him as grave as a judge, for he has got something to say to you in earnest. Nobody can be so stern as he is when he chooses to put on his wig and gown." So Clara went into the Colonel's study, and seated herself in a chair which he had prepared for her.

She remained there for over an hour, and during the hour the conversation became very animated. Colonel Askerton's assumed gravity had given way to ordinary eagerness, during which he had walked about the room in the vehemence of his argument; and Clara, in answering him, had also put forth all her strength. She had expected that he also was going to speak to her on the propriety of her going to Norfolk; but he made no allusion to that subject, although all that he did say was founded on Will Belton's letter to himself. Belton, in speaking of the cottage, had told Colonel Askerton that Miss Amedroz would be his future landlord, and had then gone on to explain that it was his, Belton's, intention to destroy the entail, and allow the property to descend from the father to the daughter. "As Miss Amedroz is with you now," he said, "may I beg you to take the trouble to explain the matter to her at length, and to make her understand that the estate is now, at this moment, in fact her own. Her possession of it does not depend on any act of hers,—or, indeed,

upon her own will or wish in the matter." On this subject Colonel Askerton had argued, using all his skill to make Clara in truth perceive that she was her father's heiress,—through the generosity undoubtedly of her cousin,—and that she had no alternative but to assume the possession which was thus thrust upon her.

And so eloquent was the Colonel that Clara was staggered, though she was not convinced. "It is quite impossible," she said. "Though he may be able to make it over to me, I can give it back again."

"I think not. In such a matter as this a lady in your position can only be guided by her natural advisers,—her father's lawyer and other family friends."

"I don't know why a young lady should be in any way different from an old gentleman."

"But an old gentleman would not hesitate under such circumstances. The entail in itself was a cruelty, and the operation of it on your poor brother's death was additionally cruel."

"It is cruel that any one should be poor,"

argued Clara ; “ but that does not take away the right of a rich man to his property.”

There was much more of this sort said between them, till Clara was at any rate convinced that Colonel Askerton believed that she ought to be the owner of the property. And then at last he ventured upon another argument which soon drove Clara out of the room. “ There is, I believe, one way in which it can all be made right,” said he.

“ What way ?” said Clara, forgetting in her eagerness the obviousness of the mode which her companion was about to point out.

“ Of course, I know nothing of this myself,” he said smiling ; “ but Mary thinks that you and your cousin might arrange it between you if you were together.”

“ You must not listen to what she says about that, Colonel Askerton.”

“ Must I not ? Well ; I will not listen to more than I can help ; but Mary, as you know, is a persistent talker. I, at any rate, have done my commission.” Then Clara left him and was alone for what remained of the afternoon.

It could not be, she said to herself, that the property ought to be hers. It would make her miserable, were she once to feel that she had accepted it. Some small allowance out of it, coming to her from the brotherly love of her cousin,—some moderate stipend sufficient for her livelihood, she thought she could accept from him. It seemed to her that it was her destiny to be dependent on charity,—to eat bread given to her from the benevolence of a friend; and she thought that she could endure his benevolence better than that of any other. Benevolence from Aylmer Park or from Perivale would be altogether unendurable.

But why should it not be as Colonel Asker-ton had proposed? That this cousin of hers loved her with all his heart,—with a constancy for which she had at first given him no credit, she was well aware. And, as regarded herself, she loved him better than all the world beside. She had at last become conscious that she could not now marry Captain Aylmer without sin,—without false vows, and fatal injury to herself and him. To the prospect of that

marriage, as her future fate, an end must be put at any rate,—an end, if that which had already taken place was not to be regarded as end enough. But yet she had been engaged to Captain Aylmer,—was engaged to him even now. When last her cousin had mentioned to her Captain Aylmer's name she had declared that she loved him still. How then could she turn round now, and so soon accept the love of another man? How could she bring herself to let her cousin assume to himself the place of a lover, when it was but the other day that she had rebuked him for expressing the faintest hope in that direction?

But yet,—yet—! As for going to Plaistow, that was quite out of question.

“So you are to be the heiress after all,” said Mrs. Askerton to her that night in her bedroom.

“No; I am not to be the heiress after all,” said Clara, rising against her friend impetuously.

“You'll have to be lady of Belton in one way or the other at any rate,” said Mrs. Askerton.

CHAPTER VI.

MISS AMEDROZ IS PURSUED.

“I SUPPOSE now, my dear, it may be considered that everything is settled about that young lady,” said Lady Aylmer to her son, on the same day that Miss Amedroz left Aylmer Park.

“Nothing is settled, ma’am,” said the Captain.

“You don’t mean to tell me that after what has passed you intend to follow her up any further.”

“I shall certainly endeavour to see her again.”

“Then, Frederic, I must tell you that you

are very wrong indeed ;—almost worse than wrong. I would say wicked, only I feel sure that you will think better of it. You cannot mean to tell me that you would—marry her after what has taken place ?”

“The question is whether she would marry me.”

“That is nonsense, Frederic. I wonder that you, who are generally so clear-sighted, cannot see more plainly than that. She is a scheming, artful young woman, who is playing a regular game to catch a husband.”

“If that were so, she would have been more humble to you, ma’am.”

“Not a bit, Fred. That’s just it. That has her been cleverness. She tried that on at first, and found that she could not get round me. Don’t allow yourself to be deceived by that, I pray. And then there is no knowing how she may be bound up with those horrid people, so that she cannot throw them over, even if she would.”

“I don’t think you understand her, ma’am.”

“Oh ;—very well. But I understand this.

and you had better understand it too;—that she will never again enter a house of which I am the mistress; nor can I ever enter a house in which she is received. If you choose to make her your wife after that, I have done.” Lady Aylmer had not done, or nearly done; but we need hear no more of her threats or entreaties. Her son left Aylmer Park immediately after Easter Sunday, and as he went, the mother, nodding her head, declared to her daughter that that marriage would never come off, let Clara Amedroz be ever so sly, or ever so clever.

“Think of what I have said to you, Fred,” said Sir Anthony, as he took his leave of his son.

“Yes, sir, I will.”

“You can’t be better off than you are;—you can’t, indeed.” With these words in his ears Captain Aylmer started for London, intending to follow Clara down to Belton. He hardly knew his own mind on this matter of his purposed marriage. He was almost inclined to agree with his father that he was very well

off as he was. He was almost inclined to agree with his mother in her condemnation of Clara's conduct. He was almost inclined to think that he had done enough towards keeping the promise made to his auut on her deathbed,—but still he was not quite contented with himself. He desired to be honest and true, as far as his ideas went of honesty and truth, and his conscience told him that Clara had been treated with cruelty by his mother. I am inclined to think that Lady Aylmer, in spite of her high experience and character for wisdom, had not fought her battle altogether well. No man likes to be talked out of his marriage by his mother, and especially not so when the talking takes the shape of threats. When she told him that under no circumstances would she again know Clara Amedroz, he was driven by his spirit of manhood to declare to himself that that menace from her should not have the slightest influence on him. The word or two which his father said was more effective. After all it might be better for him in his peculiar position to have no wife at all. He did begin

to believe that he had no need for a wife. He had never before thought so much of his father's example as he did now. Clara was manifestly a hot-tempered woman,—a very hot-tempered woman indeed! Now his mother was also a hot-tempered woman, and he could see the result in the present condition of his father's life. He resolved that he would follow Clara to Belton, so that some final settlement might be made between them; but in coming to this resolution he acknowledged to himself that should she decide against him he would not break his heart. She, however, should have her chance. Undoubtedly it was only right that she should have her chance.

But the difficulty of the circumstances in which he was placed was so great, that it was almost impossible for him to make up his mind fixedly to any purpose in reference to Clara. As he passed through London on his way to Belton he called at Mr. Green's chambers with reference to that sum of fifteen hundred pounds, which it was now absolutely necessary that he should make over to Miss Amedroz,

and from Mr. Green he learned that William Belton had given positive instructions as to the destination of the Belton estate. He would not inherit it, or have anything to do with it under the entail,—from the effects of which he desired to be made entirely free. Mr. Green, who knew that Captain Aylmer was engaged to marry his client, and who knew nothing of any interruption to that agreement, felt no hesitation in explaining all this to Captain Aylmer. “I suppose you had heard of it before,” said Mr. Green. Captain Aylmer certainly had heard of it, and had been very much struck by the idea; but up to this moment he had not quite believed in it. Coming simply from William Belton to Clara Amedroz, such an offer might be no more than a strong argument used in love-making. “Take back the property, but take me with it, of course.” That Captain Aylmer thought might have been the correct translation of Mr. William Belton’s romance. But he was forced to look at the matter differently when he found that it had been put into

a lawyer's hands. "Yes," said he, "I have heard of it. Mr. Belton mentioned it to me himself." This was not strictly true. Clara had mentioned it to him; but Belton had come into the room immediately afterwards, and Captain Aylmer might probably have been mistaken.

"He's quite in earnest," said Mr. Green.

"Of course, I can say nothing, Mr. Green, as I am myself so nearly interested in the matter. It is a great question, no doubt, how far such an entail as that should be allowed to operate.

"I think it should stand, as a matter of course. I think Belton is wrong," said Mr. Green.

"Of course I can give no opinion," said the other.

"I'll tell you what you can do, Captain Aylmer. You can suggest to Miss Amedroz that there should be a compromise. Let them divide it. They are both clients of mine, and in that way I shall do my duty to each. Let them divide it. Belton has money enough

to buy up the other moiety, and in that way would still be Belton of Belton.”

Captain Aylmer had not the slightest objection to such a plan. Indeed, he regarded it as in all respects a wise and salutary arrangement. The moiety of the Belton estate might probably be worth twenty-five thousand pounds, and the addition of such a sum as that to his existing means would make all the difference in the world as to the expediency of his marriage. His father's arguments would all fall to the ground if twenty-five thousand pounds were to be obtained in this way; and he had but little doubt that such a change in affairs would go far to mitigate his mother's wrath. But he was by no means mercenary in his views;—so, at least, he assured himself. Clara should have her chance with or without the Belton estate,—or with or without the half of it. He was by no means mercenary. Had he not made his offer to her,—and repeated it almost with obstinacy, when she had no prospect of any fortune? He could always remember that of

himself at least; and remembering that now, he could take a delight in these bright money prospects without having to accuse himself in the slightest degree of mercenary motives. This fortune was a godsend which he could take with clean hands;—if only he should ultimately be able to take the lady who possessed the fortune!

From London he wrote to Clara, telling her that he proposed to visit her at Belton. His letter was written before he had seen Mr. Green, and was not very fervent in its expressions; but, nevertheless, it was a fair letter, written with the intention of giving her a fair chance. He had seen with great sorrow, —“with heartfelt grief,” that quarrel between his mother and his own Clara. Thinking, as he felt himself obliged to think, about Mrs. Askerton, he could not but feel that his mother had cause for her anger. But he himself was unprejudiced, and was ready, and anxious also, —the word anxious was underscored, —to carry out his engagement. A few words between them might probably set everything

right, and therefore he proposed to meet her at the Belton Castle house, at such an hour, on such a day. He should run down to Perivale on his journey, and perhaps Clara would let him have a line addressed to him there. Such was his letter.

“What do you think of that?” said Clara, showing it to Mrs. Askerton on the afternoon of the day on which she had received it.

“What do you think of it?” said Mrs. Askerton. “I can only hope, that he will not come within the reach of my hands.”

“You are not angry with me for showing it to you?”

“No;—why should I be angry with you? Of course I knew it all without any showing. Do not tell Colonel Askerton, or they will be killing each other.”

“Of course I shall not tell Colonel Askerton; but I could not help showing this to you.”

“And you will meet him?”

“Yes; I shall meet him. What else can I do?”

“Unless, indeed, you were to write and tell him that it would do no good.”

“It will be better that he should come.”

“If you allow him to talk you over you will be a wretched woman all your life.”

“It will be better that he should come,” said Clara again. And then she wrote to Captain Aylmer at Perivale, telling him that she would be at the house at the hour he had named, on the day he had named.

When that day came she walked across the park a little before the time fixed, not wishing to meet Captain Aylmer before she had reached the house. It was now nearly the middle of April, and the weather was soft and pleasant. It was almost summer again, and as she felt this, she thought of all the events which had occurred since the last summer,—of their agony of grief at the catastrophe which had closed her brother's life, of her aunt's death first, and then of her father's following so close upon the other, and of the two offers of marriage made to her,—as to which she was now aware that she had accepted the wrong man and rejected the wrong man. She was steadily minded, now, at this moment, that

before she parted from Captain Aylmer, her engagement with him should be brought to a close. Now, at this coming interview, so much at any rate should be done. She had tried to make herself believe that she felt for him that sort of affection which a woman should have for the man she is to marry, but she had failed. She hardly knew whether she had in truth ever loved him ; but she was quite sure that she did not love him now. No :— she had done with Aylmer Park, and she could feel thankful, amidst all her troubles, that that difficulty should vex her no more. In showing Captain Aylmer's letter to Mrs. Askerton she had made no such promise as this, but her mind had been quite made up. “He certainly shall not talk me over,” she said to herself as she walked across the park.

But she could not see her way so clearly out of that further difficulty with regard to her cousin. It might be that she would be able to rid herself of the one lover with comparative ease ; but she could not bring herself to entertain the idea of accepting the other. It was

true that this man longed for her,—desired to call her his own, with a wearing, anxious, painful desire which made his heart grievously heavy,—heavy as though with lead hanging to its strings ; and it was true that Clara knew that it was so. It was true also that his spirit had mastered her spirit, and that his persistence had conquered her resistance,—the resistance, that is, of her feelings. But there remained with her a feminine shame, which made it seem to her to be impossible that she should now reject Captain Aylmer, and as a consequence of that rejection, accept Will Belton's hand. As she thought of this, she could not see her way out of her trouble in that direction with any of that clearness which belonged to her in reference to Captain Aylmer.

She had been an hour in the house before he came, and never did an hour go so heavily with her. There was no employment for her about the place, and Mrs. Bunce, the old woman who now lived there, could not understand why her late mistress chose to remain seated among the unused furniture. Clara had

of course told her that a gentleman was coming. "Not Mr. Will?" said the woman. "No; it is not Mr. Will," said Clara; "his name is Captain Aylmer." "Oh, indeed." And then Mrs. Bunce looked at her with a mystified look. Why on earth should not the gentleman call on Miss Amedroz at Mrs. Askerton's cottage. "I'll be sure to show 'un up, when a comes, at any rate," said the old woman solemnly;—and Clara felt that it was all very uncomfortable.

At last the gentleman did come, and was shown up with all the ceremony of which Mrs. Bunce was capable. "Here he be, mum." Then Mrs. Bunce paused a moment before she retreated, anxious to learn whether the new comer was a friend or a foe. She concluded from the Captain's manner that he was a very dear friend, and then she departed.

"I hope you are not surprised at my coming," said Captain Aylmer, still holding Clara by the hand.

"A little surprised," she said, smiling.

"But not annoyed?"

“No;—not annoyed.”

“As soon as you had left Aylmer Park I felt that it was the right thing to do;—the only thing to do,—as I told my mother.”

“I hope you have not come in opposition to her wishes,” said Clara, unable to control a slight tone of banter as she spoke.

“In this matter I found myself compelled to act in accordance with my own judgment,” said he, untouched by her sarcasm.

“Then I suppose that Lady Aylmer is, is vexed with you for coming here. I shall be so sorry for that;—so very sorry, as no good can come of it.”

“Well;—I am not so sure of that. My mother is a most excellent woman, one for whose opinions on all matters I have the highest possible value;—a value so high, that—that—that——”

“That you never ought to act in opposition to it. That is what you really mean, Captain Aylmer; and upon my word I think that you are right.”

“No, Clara; that is not what I mean,—not

exactly that. Indeed, just at present I mean the reverse of that. There are some things on which a man must act on his own judgment, irrespectively of the opinions of any one else."

"Not of a mother, Captain Aylmer?"

"Yes ;—of a mother. That is to say, a man must do so. With a lady of course it is different. I was very, very sorry that there should have been any unpleasantness at Aylmer Park."

"It was not pleasant to me, certainly."

"Nor to any of us, Clara."

"At any rate, it need not be repeated."

"I hope not."

"No ;—it certainly need not be repeated. I know now that I was wrong to go to Aylmer Park. I felt sure beforehand that there were many things as to which I could not possibly agree with Lady Aylmer, and I ought not to have gone."

"I don't see that at all, Clara."

"I do see it now."

"I can't understand you. What things? Why should you be determined to disagree

with my mother? Surely you ought at any rate to endeavour to think as she thinks."

"I cannot do that, Captain Aylmer."

"I am sorry to hear you speak in this way. I have come here all the way from Yorkshire to try to put things straight between us; but you receive me as though you would remember nothing but that unpleasant quarrel."

"It was so unpleasant,—so very unpleasant! I had better speak out the truth at once. I think that Lady Aylmer ill-used me cruelly. I do. No one can talk me out of that conviction. Of course I am sorry to be driven to say as much to you,—and I should never have said it, had you not come here. But when you speak of me and your mother together, I must say what I feel. Your mother and I, Captain Aylmer, are so opposed to each other, not only in feeling, but in opinions also, that it is impossible that we should be friends;—impossible that we should not be enemies if we are brought together."

This she said with great energy, looking

intently into his face as she spoke. He was seated near her, on a chair from which he was leaning over towards her, holding his hat in both hands between his legs. Now, as he listened to her, he drew his chair still nearer, ridding himself of his hat, which he left upon the carpet, and keeping his eyes upon hers as though he were fascinated. "I am sorry to hear you speak like this," he said.

"It is best to say the truth."

"But, Clara, if you intend to be my wife——"

"Oh, no ;—that is impossible now."

"What is impossible?"

"Impossible that I should become your wife. Indeed I have convinced myself that you do not wish it."

"But I do wish it."

"No ;—no. If you will question your heart about it quietly, you will find that you do not wish it."

"You wrong me, Clara."

"At any rate it cannot be so."

"I will not take that answer from you," he

said, getting up from his chair, and walking once up and down the room. Then he returned to it, and repeated his words. "I will not take that answer from you. An engagement such as ours cannot be put aside like an old glove. You do not mean to tell me that all that has been between us is to mean nothing." There was something now like feeling in his tone, something like passion in his gesture, and Clara, though she had no thought of changing her purpose, was becoming unhappy at the idea of his unhappiness.

"It has meant nothing," she said. "We have been like children together, playing at being in love. It is a game from which you will come out scatheless, but I have been scalded."

"Scalded!"

"Well;—never mind. I do not mean to complain, and certainly not of you."

"I have come here all the way from Yorkshire in order that things may be put right between us."

“ You have been very good,—very good to come, and I will not say that I regret your trouble. It is best, I think, that we should meet each other once more face to face, so that we may understand each other. There was no understanding anything during those terrible days at Aylmer Park.” Then she paused, but as he did not speak at once she went on. “ I do not blame you for anything that has taken place, but I am quite sure of this,—that you and I could never be happy together as man and wife.”

“ I do not know why you say so ; I do not indeed.”

“ You would disapprove of everything that I should do. You do disapprove of what I am doing now.”

“ Disapprove of what ?”

“ I am staying with my friend, Mrs. Askerton.”

He felt that this was hard upon him. As she had shown herself inclined to withdraw herself from him, he had become more resolute in his desire to follow her up, and to hold by

his engagement. He was not employed now in giving her another chance,—as he had proposed to himself to do,—but was using what eloquence he had to obtain another chance for himself. Lady Aylmer had almost made him believe that Clara would be the suppliant, but now he was the suppliant himself. In his anxiety to keep her he was willing even to pass over her terrible iniquity in regard to Mrs Askerton,—that great sin which had led to all these troubles. He had once written to ^{her} her about Mrs. Askerton, using very strong language, and threatening her with his mother's full displeasure. At that time Mrs. Askerton had simply been her friend. There had been no question then of her taking refuge under that woman's roof. Now she had repelled Lady Aylmer's counsels with scorn, was living as a guest in Mrs. Askerton's house; and yet he was willing to pass over the Askerton difficulty without a word. He was willing not only to condone past offences, but to wink at existing iniquity! But she,—she who was the sinner, would not

permit of this. She herself dragged up Mrs. Askerton's name, and seemed to glory in her own shame.

"I had not intended," said he, "to speak of your friend."

"I only mention her to show how impossible it is that we should ever agree upon some subjects,—as to which a husband and wife should always be of one mind. I knew this from the moment in which I got your letter,—and only that I was a coward I should have said so then."

"And you mean to quarrel with me altogether?"

"No ;—why should we quarrel?"

"Why, indeed?" said he.

"But I wish it to be settled,—quite settled, as from the nature of things it must be, that there shall be no attempt at renewal of our engagement. After what has passed, how could I enter your mother's house?"

"But you need not enter it." Now, in his emergency he was willing to give up anything,—everything. He had been prepared to talk

her over into a reconciliation with his mother, to admit that there had been faults on both sides, to come down from his high pedestal and discuss the matter as though Clara and his mother stood upon the same footing. Having recognised the spirit of his lady-love, he had told himself that so much indignity as that must be endured. But now, he had been carried so far beyond this, that he was willing, in the sudden vehemence of his love, to throw his mother over altogether, and to accede to any terms which Clara might propose to him. "Of course, I would wish you to be friends," he said, using now all the tones of a suppliant; "but if you found that it could not be so——"

"Do you think that I would divide you from your mother?"

"There need be no question as to that."

"Ah;—there you are wrong. There must be such questions. I should have thought of it sooner."

"Clara, you are more to me than my mother. Ten times more." As he said this he came up and knelt down beside her.

“You are everything to me. You will not throw me over.” He was a suppliant indeed, and such supplications are very potent with women. Men succeed often by the simple earnestness of their prayers. Women cannot refuse to give that which is asked for with so much of the vehemence of true desire. “Clara, you have promised to be my wife. You have twice promised; and can have no right to go back because you are displeased with what my mother may have said. I am not responsible for my mother. Clara, say that you will be my wife.” As he spoke he strove to take her hand, and his voice sounded as though there were in truth something of passion in his heart.

CHAPTER VII.

THERE IS NOTHING TO TELL.

CAPTAIN AYLMER had never before this knelt to Clara Amedroz. Such kneeling on the part of lovers used to be the fashion because lovers in those days held in higher value than they do now that which they asked their ladies to give,—or because they pretended to do so. The forms at least of supplication were used ; whereas in these wiser days Augustus simply suggests to Caroline that they two might as well make fools of themselves together,—and so the thing is settled without the need of much prayer. Captain Aylmer's engagement had been originally made somewhat after this fashion. He had not, indeed, spoken of the thing contem-

plated as a folly, not being a man given to little waggeries of that nature; but he had been calm, unenthusiastic, and reasonable. He had not attempted to evince any passion, and would have been quite content that Clara should believe that he married as much from obedience to his aunt as from love for herself, had he not found that Clara would not take him at all under such a conviction. But though she had declined to come to him after that fashion,—though something more than that had been needed,—still she had been won easily, and, therefore, lightly prized. I fear that it is so with everything that we value,—with our horses, our houses, our wines, and, above all, with our women. Where is the man who has heart and soul big enough to love a woman with increased force of passion because she has at once recognised in him all that she has herself desired? Captain Aylmer having won his spurs easily, had taken no care in buckling them, and now found, to his surprise, that he was like to lose them. He had told himself that he would only be too glad to shuffle his

feet free of their bondage ; but now that they were going from him, he began to find that they were very necessary for the road that he was to travel. "Clara," he said, kneeling by her side, "you are more to me than my mother ; ten times more !"

This was all new to her. Hitherto, though she had never desired that he should assume such attitude as this, she had constantly been unconsciously wounded by his coldness,—by his cold propriety and unbending self-possession. His cold propriety and unbending self-possession were gone now, and he was there at her feet. Such an argument, used at Aylmer Park, would have conquered her,—would have won her at once, in spite of herself ; but now she was minded to be resolute. She had sworn to herself that she would not peril herself, or him, by joining herself to a man with whom she had so little sympathy, and who apparently had none with her. But in what way was she to answer such a prayer as that which was now made to her ? The man who addressed her was entitled to use all the warmth of an

accepted lover. He only asked for that which had already been given to him.

“Captain Aylmer——,” she began.

“Why is it to be Captain Aylmer? What have I done that you should use me in this way? It was not I who,—who,—made you unhappy at Aylmer Park.”

“I will not go back to that. It is of no use. Pray get up. It shocks me to see you in this way.”

“Tell me, then, that it is once more all right between us. Say that, and I shall be happier than I ever was before;—yes, than I ever was before. I know how much I love you now, how sore it would be to lose you. I have been wrong. I had not thought enough of that, but I will think of it now.”

She found that the task before her was very difficult,—so difficult that she almost broke down in performing it. It would have been so easy and, for the moment, so pleasant to have yielded. He had his hand upon her arm, having attempted to take her hand. In preventing that she had succeeded, but she could

not altogether make herself free from him without rising. For a moment she had paused,—paused as though she were about to yield. For a moment, as he looked into her eyes, he had thought that he would again be victorious. Perhaps there was something in his glance, some too visible return of triumph to his eyes, which warned her of her danger. “No!” she said, getting up and walking away from him; “no!”

“And what does ‘no’ mean, Clara?” Then he also rose, and stood leaning on the table. “Does it mean that you will be forsworn?”

“It means this,—that I will not come between you and your mother; that I will not be taken into a family in which I am scorned; that I will not go to Aylmer Park myself or be the means of preventing you from going there.”

“There need be no question of Aylmer Park.”

“There shall be none!”

“But, so much being allowed, you will be my wife?”

“No, Captain Aylmer;—no. I cannot be

your wife. Do not press it further ; you must know that on such a subject I would think much before I answered you. I have thought much, and I know that I am right."

"And your promised word is to go for nothing?"

"If it will comfort you to say so, you may say it. If you do not perceive that the mistake made between us has been as much your mistake as mine, and has injured me more than it has injured you, I will not remind you of it,—will never remind you of it after this."

"But there has been no mistake,—and there shall be no injury."

"Ah, Captain Aylmer! you do not understand; you cannot understand. I would not for worlds reproach you; but do you think I suffered nothing from your mother?"

"And must I pay for her sins?"

"There shall be no paying, no punishment, and no reproaches. There shall be none at least from me. But,—do not think that I speak in anger or in pride,—I will not marry into Lady Aylmer's family."

“This is too bad,—too bad! After all that is past, it is too bad!”

“What can I say? Would you advise me to do that which would make us both wretched?”

“It would not make me wretched. It would make me happy. It would satisfy me altogether.”

“It cannot be, Captain Aylmer. It cannot be. When I speak to you in that way, will you not let it be final?”

He paused a moment before he spoke again, and then he turned sharp upon her. “Tell me this, Clara; do you love me? Have you ever loved me?” She did not answer him, but stood there, listening quietly to his accusations. “You have never loved me, and yet you have allowed yourself to say that you did. Is not that true?” Still she did not answer. “I ask you whether that is not true?” But though he asked her, and paused for an answer, looking the while full into her face, yet she did not speak. “And now I suppose you will become your cousin’s wife?” he said.

“It will suit you to change, and to say that you love him.”

Then at last she spoke. “I did not think that you would have treated me in this way, Captain Aylmer! I did not expect that you would insult me!”

“I have not insulted you.”

“But your manner to me makes my task easier than I could have hoped it to be. You asked me whether I ever loved you? I once thought that I did so; and so thinking, told you, without reserve, all my feeling. When I came to find that I had been mistaken, I conceived myself bound by my engagement to rectify my own error as best I could; and I resolved, wrongly, — as I now think, very wrongly, — that I could learn as your wife to love you. Then came circumstances which showed me that a release would be good for both of us, and which justified me in accepting it. No girl could be bound by any engagement to a man who looked on and saw her treated in his own home, by his own mother, as you saw me treated at Aylmer Park. I

claim to be released myself, and I know that this release is as good for you as it is for me."

"I am the best judge of that."

"For myself at any rate I will judge. For myself I have decided. Now I have answered the questions which you asked me as to my love for yourself. To that other question which you have thought fit to put to me about my cousin, I refuse to give any answer whatsoever." Then, having said so much, she walked out of the room, closing the door behind her, and left him standing there alone.

We need not follow her as she went up, almost mechanically, into her own room,—the room that used to be her own,—and then shut herself in, waiting till she should be assured, first by sounds in the house, and then by silence, that he was gone. That she fell away greatly from the majesty of her demeanour when she was thus alone, and descended to the ordinary ways of troubled females, we may be quite sure. But to her there was no further difficulty. Her work for the day was done. In due time she would take herself to the

cottage, and all would be well, or, at any rate, comfortable with her. But what was he to do? How was he to get himself out of the house, and take himself back to London? While he had been in pursuit of her, and when he was leaving his vehicle at the public-house in the village of Belton, he,—like some other invading generals,—had failed to provide adequately for his retreat. When he was alone he took a turn or two about the room, half thinking that Clara would return to him. She could hardly leave him alone in a strange house,—him, who, as he had twice told her, had come all the way from Yorkshire to see her. But she did not return, and gradually he came to understand that he must provide for his own retreat without assistance. He was hardly aware, even now, how greatly he had transcended his usual modes of speech and action, both in the energy of his supplication and in the violence of his rebuke. He had been lifted for awhile out of himself by the excitement of his position, and now that he was subsiding into quiescence, he was uncon-

scious that he had almost mounted into passion,—that he had spoken of love very nearly with eloquence. But he did recognise this as a fact,—that Clara was not to be his wife, and that he had better get back from Belton to London as quickly as possible. It would be well for him to teach himself to look back on the result of his aunt's dying request as an episode in his life satisfactorily concluded. His mother had undoubtedly been right. Clara, he could now see, would have led him a devil of a life; and even had she come to him possessed of a moiety of the property,—a supposition as to which he had very strong doubts,—still she might have been dear at the money. “No real feeling,” he said to himself, as he walked about the room,—“none whatever; and then so deficient in delicacy!” But still he was discontented,—because he had been rejected, and therefore tried to make himself believe that he could still have her if he chose to persevere. “But no,” he said, as he continued to pace the room, “I have done everything,—more than everything that

honour demands. I shall not ask her again. It is her own fault. She is an imperious woman, and my mother read her character aright." It did not occur to him, as he thus consoled himself for what he had lost, that his mother's accusation against Clara had been altogether of a different nature. When we console ourselves by our own arguments, we are not apt to examine their accuracy with much strictness.

But whether he were consoled or not, it was necessary that he should go, and in his going he felt himself to be ill-treated. He left the room, and as he went down-stairs was disturbed and tormented by the creaking of his own boots. He tried to be dignified as he walked through the hall, and was troubled at his failure, though he was not conscious of any one looking at him. Then it was grievous that he should have to let himself out of the front door without attendance. At ordinary times he thought as little of such things as most men, and would not be aware whether he opened a door for himself or had it opened for

him by another;—but now there was a distressing awkwardness in the necessity for self-exertion. He did not know the turn of the handle, and was unfamiliar with the manner of exit. He was being treated with indignity, and before he had escaped from the house had come to think that the Amedroz and Belton people were somewhat below him. He endeavoured to go out without a noise, but there was a slam of the door, without which he could not get the lock to work; and Clara, up in her own room, knew all about it.

“Carriage;—yes; of course I want the carriage,” he said to the unfortunate boy at the public-house. “Didn’t you hear me say that I wanted it?” He had come down with a pair of horses, and as he saw them being put to the vehicle he wished he had been contented with one. As he was standing there, waiting, a gentleman rode by, and the boy, in answer to his question, told him that the horseman was Colonel Askerton. Before the day was over Colonel Askerton would probably know all that had happened to him. “Do move a

little quicker; will you?" he said to the boy and the old man who was to drive him. Then he got into the carriage, and was driven out of Belton, devoutly purposing that he never would return; and as he made his way back to Perivale he thought of a certain Lady Emily, who would, as he assured himself, have behaved much better than Clara Amedroz had done in any such scene as that which had just taken place.

When Clara was quite sure that Captain Aylmer was off the premises, she, too, descended, but she did not immediately leave the house. She walked through the room, and rang for the old woman, and gave certain directions,—as to the performance of which she certainly was not very anxious, and was careful to make Mrs. Bunce understand that nothing had occurred between her and the gentleman that was either exalting or depressing in its nature. "I suppose Captain Aylmer went out, Mrs. Bunce?" "Oh yes, miss, a went out. I stocd and see'd un from the top of the kitchen stairs." "You might have

opened the door for him, Mrs. Bunce.”
“Indeed then I never thought of it, miss, seeing the house so empty and the like.” Clara said that it did not signify; and then, after an hour of composure, she walked back across the park to the cottage.

“Well?” said Mrs. Askerton as soon as Clara was inside the drawing-room.

“Well,” replied Clara.

“What have you got to tell? Do tell me what you have to tell.”

“I have nothing to tell.”

“Clara, that is impossible. Have you seen him? I know you have seen him, because he went by from the house about an hour since.”

“Oh yes; I have seen him.”

“And what have you said to him?”

“Pray do not ask me these questions just now. I have got to think of it all:—to think what he did say and what I said.”

“But you will tell me.”

“Yes; I suppose so.” Then Mrs. Askerton was silent on the subject for the remainder of the day, allowing Clara even to go to bed

without another question. And nothing was asked on the following morning,—nothing till the usual time for the writing of letters.

“Shall you have anything for the post?” said Mrs. Askerton.

“There is plenty of time yet.”

“Not too much if you mean to go out at all. Come, Clara, you had better write to him at once.”

“Write to whom? I don’t know that I have any letter to write at all.” Then there was a pause. “As far as I can see,” she said, “I may give up writing altogether for the future, unless some day you may care to hear from me.”

“But you are not going away.”

“Not just yet;—if you will keep me. To tell you the truth, Mrs. Askerton, I do not yet know where on earth to take myself.”

“Wait here till we turn you out.”

“I have got to put my house in order. You know what I mean. The job ought not to be a troublesome one, for it is a very small house.”

“I suppose I know what you mean.”

“It will not be a very smart establishment. But I must look it all in the face; must I not? Though it were to be no house at all, I cannot stay here all my life.”

“Yes, you may. You have lost Aylmer Park because you were too noble not to come to us.”

“No,” said Clara, speaking aloud, with bright eyes,—almost with her hands clenched. “No;—I deny that.”

“I shall choose to think so for my own purposes. Clara, you are savage to me;—almost always savage; but next to him I love you better than all the world beside. And so does he. ‘It’s her courage,’ he said to me the other day, ‘That she should dare to do as she pleases here, is nothing; but to have dared to persevere in the fangs of that old dragon,’—it was just what he said,—‘that was wonderful!’”

“There is an end of the old dragon now, so far as I am concerned.”

“Of course there is;—and of the young

dragon too. You wouldn't have had the heart to keep me in suspense if you had accepted him again. You couldn't have been so pleasant last night if that had been so."

"I did not know I was very pleasant."

"Yes, you were. You were soft and gracious,—gracious for you, at least. And now, dear, do tell me about it. Of course I am dying to know."

"There is nothing to tell."

"That is nonsense. There must be a thousand things to tell. At any rate it is quite decided?"

"Yes; it is quite decided."

"All the dragons, old and young, are banished into outer darkness."

"Either that, or else they are to have all the light to themselves."

"Such light as glimmers through the gloom of Aylmer Park. And was he contented? I hope not. I hope you had him on his knees before he left you."

"Why should you hope that? How can you talk such nonsense?"

“Because I wish that he should recognise what he has lost ;—that he should know that he has been a fool ;—a mean fool.”

“Mrs. Askerton, I will not have him spoken of like that. He is a man very estimable,—of estimable qualities.”

“Fiddle-de-dee. He is an ape,—a monkey to be carried on his mother’s organ. His only good quality was that you could have carried him on yours. I can tell you one thing ;—there is not a woman breathing that will ever carry William Belton on hers. Whoever his wife may be, she will have to dance to his piping.”

“With all my heart ;—and I hope the tunes will be good.”

“But I wish I could have been present to have heard what passed ;—hidden, you know, behind a curtain. You won’t tell me ?”

“I will tell you not a word more.”

“Then I will get it out from Mrs. Bunce. I’ll be bound she was listening.”

“Mrs. Bunce will have nothing to tell you ; I do not know why you should be so curious.”

“Answer me one question at least:—when it came to the last, did he want to go on with it? Was the final triumph with him or with you?”

“There was no final triumph. Such things, when they have to end, do not end triumphantly.”

“And is that to be all?”

“Yes;—that is to be all.”

“And you say that you have no letter to write.”

“None;—no letter; none at present; none about this affair. Captain Aylmer, no doubt, will write to his mother, and then all those who are concerned will have been told.”

Clara Amedroz held her purpose and wrote no letter, but Mrs. Askerton was not so discreet, or so indiscreet, as the case might be. She did write,—not on that day or on the next, but before a week had passed by. She wrote to Norfolk, telling Clara not a word of her letter, and by return of post the answer came. But the answer was for Clara, not for Mrs. Askerton, and was as follows:

“Plaistow Hall, April, 186—

“MY DEAR CLARA,

“I don't know whether I ought to tell you but I suppose I may as well tell you, that Mary has had a letter from Mrs. Askerton. It was a kind, obliging letter, and I am very grateful to her. She has told us that you have separated yourself altogether from the Aylmer Park people. I don't suppose you'll think I ought to pretend to be very sorry. I can't be sorry, even though I know how much you have lost in a worldly point of view. I could not bring myself to like Captain Aylmer, though I tried hard.” Oh Mr. Belton, Mr. Belton! “He and I never could have been friends, and it is no use my pretending regret that you have quarrelled with them. But that, I suppose, is all over, and I will not say a word more about the Aylmers.

“I am writing now chiefly at Mary's advice, and because she says that something should be settled about the estate. Of course it is necessary that you should feel yourself to be

the mistress of your own income, and understand exactly your own position. Mary says that this should be arranged at once, so that you may be able to decide how and where you will live. I therefore write to say that I will have nothing to do with your father's estate at Belton;—nothing, that is, for myself. I have written to Mr. Green to tell him that you are to be considered as the heir. If you will allow me to undertake the management of the property as your agent, I shall be delighted. I think I could do it as well as any one else: and, as we agreed that we would always be dear and close friends, I think that you will not refuse me the pleasure of serving you in this way.

“And now Mary has a proposition to make, as to which she will write herself to-morrow, but she has permitted me to speak of it first. If you will accept her as a visitor, she will go to you at Belton. She thinks, and I think too, that you ought to know each other. I suppose nothing would make you come here, at present, and therefore she must go to you.

She thinks that all about the estate would be settled more comfortably if you two were together. At any rate, it would be very nice for her,—and I think you would like my sister Mary. She proposes to start about the 10th of May. I should take her as far as London and see her off, and she would bring her own maid with her. In this way she thinks that she would get as far as Taunton very well. She had, perhaps, better stay there for one night, but that can all be settled if you will say that you will receive her at the house.

“I cannot finish my letter without saying one word for myself. You know what my feelings have been, and I think you know that they still are, and always must be, the same. From almost the first moment that I saw you I have loved you. When you refused me I was very unhappy; but I thought I might still have a chance, and therefore I resolved to try again. Then, when I heard that you were engaged to Captain Aylmer, I was indeed broken-hearted. Of course I could not be angry with you.

I was not angry, but I was simply broken-hearted. I found that I loved you so much that I could not make myself happy without you. It was all of no use, for I knew that you were to be married to Captain Aylmer. I knew it, or thought that I knew it. There was nothing to be done,—only I knew that I was wretched. I suppose it is selfishness, but I felt, and still feel, that unless I can have you for my wife, I cannot be happy or care for anything. Now you are free again,—free, I mean, from Captain Aylmer;—and how is it possible that I should not again have a hope? Nothing but your marriage or death could keep me from hoping.

“I don’t know much about the Aylmers. I know nothing of what has made you quarrel with the people at Aylmer Park;—nor do I want to know. To me you are once more that Clara Amedroz with whom I used to walk in Belton Park, with your hand free to be given wherever your heart can go with it. While it is free I shall always ask for it. I know that it is in many ways above my reach.

I quite understand that in education and habits of thinking you are my superior. But nobody can love you better than I do. I sometimes fancy that nobody could ever love you so well. Mary thinks that I ought to allow a time to go by before I say all this again;—but what is the use of keeping it back? It seems to me to be more honest to tell you at once that the only thing in the world for which I care one straw is that you should be my wife.

“Your most affectionate Cousin,

“WILLIAM BELTON.”

“Miss Belton is coming here, to the castle, in a fortnight,” said Clara that morning at breakfast. Both Colonel Askerton and his wife were in the room, and she was addressing herself chiefly to the former.

“Indeed, Miss Belton! And is he coming?” said Colonel Askerton.

“So you have heard from Plaistow?” said Mrs. Askerton.

“Yes;—in answer to your letter. No,

Colonel Askerton, my cousin William is not coming. But his sister purposes to be here, and I must go up to the house and get it ready."

"That will do when the time comes," said Mrs Askerton.

"I did not mean quite immediately."

"And are you to be her guest, or is she to be yours?" said Colonel Askerton.

"It's her brother's home, and therefore I suppose I must be hers. Indeed it must be so, as I have no means of entertaining any one."

"Something, no doubt, will be settled," said the Colonel.

"Oh, what a weary word that is," said Clara; "weary, at least, for a woman's ears! It sounds of poverty and dependence, and endless trouble given to others, and all the miseries of female dependence. If I were a young man I should be allowed to settle for myself."

"There would be no question about the property in that case," said the Colonel.

“And there need be no question now,” said Mrs. Askerton.

When the two women were alone together, Clara, of course, scolded her friend for having written to Norfolk without letting it be known that she was doing so;—scolded her, and declared how vain it was for her to make useless efforts for an unattainable end; but Mrs. Askerton always managed to slip out of these reproaches, neither asserting herself to be right, nor owning herself to be wrong. “But you must answer his letter,” she said.

“Of course I shall do that.”

“I wish I knew what he said.”

“I shan’t show it you, if you mean that.”

“All the same I wish I knew what he said.”

Clara, of course, did answer the letter; but she wrote her answer to Mary, sending, however, one little scrap to Mary’s brother. She wrote to Mary at great length, striving to explain, with long and laborious arguments, that it was quite impossible that she should accept the Belton estate from her cousin.

That subject, however, and the manner of her future life, she would discuss with her dear cousin Mary, when Mary should have arrived. And then Clara said how she would go to Taunton to meet her cousin, and how she would prepare William's house for the reception of William's sister; and how she would love her cousin when she should come to know her. All of which was exceedingly proper and pretty. Then there was a little postscript, "Give the enclosed to William." And this was the note to William:

"DEAR WILLIAM,

"Did you not say that you would be my brother? Be my brother always. I will accept from your hands all that a brother could do; and when that arrangement is quite fixed, I will love you as much as Mary loves you, and trust you as completely; and I will be obedient, as a younger sister should be.

"Your loving Sister,

"C. A.

“It’s all no good,” said William Belton, as he crunched the note in his hand. “I might as well shoot myself. Get out of the way there, will you ?” And the injured groom scudded across the farm-yard, knowing that there was something wrong with his master.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARY BELTON.

It was about the middle of the pleasant month of May when Clara Amedroz again made that often repeated journey to Taunton, with the object of meeting Mary Belton. She had transferred herself and her own peculiar belongings back from the cottage to the house, and had again established herself there so that she might welcome her new friend. But she was not satisfied with simply receiving her guest at Belton, and therefore she made the journey to Taunton, and settled herself for the night at the inn. She was careful to get a bedroom for an "invalid lady," close to the sitting-room, and before she

went down to the station she saw that the cloth was laid for tea, and that the tea parlour had been made to look as pleasant as was possible with an inn parlour.

She was very nervous as she stood upon the platform waiting for the new comer to show herself. She knew that Mary was a cripple, but did not know how far her cousin was disfigured by her infirmity; and when she saw a pale-faced little woman, somewhat melancholy, but yet pretty withal, with soft, clear eyes, and only so much appearance of a stoop as to soften the hearts of those who saw her, Clara was agreeably surprised, and felt herself to be suddenly relieved of an unpleasant weight. She could talk to the woman she saw there, as to any other woman, without the painful necessity of treating her always as an invalid. "I think you are Miss Belton?" she said, holding out her hand. The likeness between Mary and her brother was too great to allow of Clara being mistaken.

"And you are Clara Amedroz? It is so good of you to come to meet me!"

“ I thought you would be dull in a strange town by yourself,”

“ It will be much nicer to have you [with me.”

Then they went together up to the inn; and when they had taken their bonnets off, Mary Belton kissed her cousin. “ You are very nearly what I fancied you,” said Mary.

“ Am I? I hope you fancied me to be something that you could like.”

“ Something that I could love very dearly. You are a little taller than what Will said; but then a gentleman is never a judge of a lady's height. And he said you were thin.”

“ I am not very fat.”

“ No; not very fat; but neither are you thin. Of course, you know, I have thought a great deal about you. It seems as though you had come to be so very near to us; and blood is thicker than water, is it not? If cousins are not friends, who can be?”

In the course of that evening they became very confidential together, and Clara thought that she could love Mary Belton better than

any woman that she had ever known. Of course they were talking about William, and Clara was at first in constant fear lest some word should be said on her lover's behalf,—some word which would drive her to declare that she would not admit him as a lover; but Mary abstained from the subject with marvellous care and tact. Though she was talking through the whole evening of her brother, she so spoke of him as almost to make Clara believe that she could not have heard of that episode in his life. Mrs. Askerton would have dashed at the subject at once; but then, as Clara told herself, Mary Belton was better than Mrs. Askerton.

A few words were said about the estate, and they originated in Clara's declaration that Mary would have to be regarded as the mistress of the house to which they were going. "I cannot agree to that," said Mary.

"But the house is William's, you know," said Clara.

"He says not."

“But of course that must be nonsense, Mary.”

“It is very evident that you know nothing of Plaistow ways, or you would not say that anything coming from William was nonsense. We are accustomed to regard all his words as law, and when he says that a thing is to be so, it always is so.”

“Then he is a tyrant at home.”

“A beneficent despot. Some despots, you know, always were beneficent.”

“He won’t have his way in this thing.”

“I’ll leave you and him to fight about that, my dear. I am so completely under his thumb that I always obey him in everything. You must not, therefore, expect to range me on your side.”

The next day they were at Belton Castle, and in a very few hours Clara felt that she was quite at home with her cousin. On the second day Mrs. Askerton came up and called,—according to an arrangement to that effect made between her and Clara. “I’ll stay away if you like it,” Mrs. Askerton had said. But

Clara had urged her to come, arguing with her that she was foolish to be thinking always of her own misfortune. "Of course I am always thinking of it," she had replied, "and always thinking that other people are thinking of it. Your cousin, Miss Belton, knows all my history, of course. But what matters? I believe it would be better that everybody should know it. I suppose she's very straight-laced and prim." "She is not prim at all," said Clara. "Well, I'll come," said Mrs. Askerton, "but I shall not be a bit surprised if I hear that she goes back to Norfolk the next day."

So Mrs. Askerton came, and Miss Belton did not go back to Norfolk. Indeed, at the end of the visit, Mrs. Askerton had almost taught herself to believe that William Belton had kept his secret, even from his sister. "She's a dear little woman," Mrs. Askerton afterwards said to Clara.

"Is she not?"

"And so thoroughly like a lady."

"Yes; I think she is a lady."

"A princess among ladies! What a pretty

little conscious way she has of asserting herself when she has an opinion and means to stick to it! I never saw a woman who got more strength out of her weakness. Who would dare to contradict her?"

"But then she knows everything so well," said Clara.

"And how like her brother she is!"

"Yes;—there is a great family likeness."

"And in character, too. I'm sure you'd find, if you were to try her, that she has all his personal firmness, though she can't show it as he does by kicking out his feet and clenching his fist."

"I'm glad you like her," said Clara.

"I do like her very much."

"It is so odd,—the way you have changed. You used to speak of him as though he was merely a clod of a farmer, and of her as a stupid old maid. Now, nothing is too good to say of them."

"Exactly, my dear;—and if you do not understand why, you are not so clever as I take you to be."

Life went on very pleasantly with them at Belton for two or three weeks ;—but with this drawback as regarded Clara, that she had no means of knowing what was to be the course of her future life. During these weeks she twice received letters from her cousin Will, and answered both of them. But these letters referred to matters of business which entailed no contradiction,—to certain details of money due to the estate before the old squire's death, and to that vexed question of Aunt Winterfield's legacy, which had by this time drifted into Belton's hands, and as to which he was inclined to act in accordance with his cousin's wishes, though he was assured by Mr. Green that the legacy was as good a legacy as had ever been left by an old woman. "I think," he said in his last letter, "that we shall be able to throw him over in spite of Mr. Green." Clara, as she read this, could not but remember that the man to be thrown over was the man to whom she had been engaged, and she could not but remember also all the circumstances of the intended legacy,—of her aunt's death, and of

the scenes which had immediately followed her death. It was so odd that William Belton should now be discussing with her the means of evading all her aunt's intentions,—and that he should be doing so, not as her accepted lover. He had, indeed, called himself her brother, but he was in truth her rejected lover.

From time to time during these weeks Mrs. Askerton would ask her whether Mr. Belton was coming to Belton, and Clara would answer her with perfect truth that she did not believe that he had any such intention. “But he must come soon,” Mrs. Askerton would say. And when Clara would answer that she knew nothing about it, Mrs. Askerton would ask further questions about Mary Belton. “Your cousin must know whether her brother is coming to look after the property?” But Miss Belton, though she heard constantly from her brother, gave no such intimation. If he had any intention of coming, she did not speak of it. During all these days she had not as yet said a word of her brother's love. Though his name was daily in her mouth,—and latterly, was

frequently mentioned by Clara,—there had been no allusion to that still enduring hope of which Will Belton himself could not but speak,—when he had any opportunity of speaking at all. And this continued till at last Clara was driven to suppose that Mary Belton knew nothing of her brother's hopes.

But at last there came a change,—a change which to Clara was as great as that which had affected her when she first found that her delightful cousin was not safe against love-making. She had made up her mind that the sister did not intend to plead for her brother,—that the sister probably knew nothing of the brother's necessity for pleading,—that the brother probably had no further need for pleading! When she remembered his last passionate words, she could not but accuse herself of hypocrisy when she allowed place in her thoughts to this latter supposition. He had been so intently earnest! The nature of the man was so eager and true! But yet, in spite of all that had been said, of all the fire in his eyes, and life in his words, and energy in

his actions, he had at last seen that his aspirations were foolish, and his desires vain. It could not otherwise be that she and Mary should pass these hours in such calm repose without an allusion to the disturbing subject! After this fashion, and with such meditations as these, had passed by the last weeks;—and then at last there came the change.

“I have had a letter from William this morning,” said Mary.

“And so have not I,” said Clara, “and yet. I expect to hear from him.”

“He means to be here soon,” said Mary.

“Oh, indeed!”

“He speaks of being here next week.”

For a moment or two Clara had yielded to the agitation caused by her cousin's tidings; but with a little gush she recovered her presence of mind, and was able to speak with all the hypothetical propriety of a female. “I am glad to hear it,” she said. It is only right that he should come.”

“He has asked me to say a word to you,—as to the purport of his journey.”

Then again Clara's courage and hypocrisy were so far subdued that they were not able to maintain her in a position adequate to the occasion. "Well," she said laughing, "what is the word?" I hope it is not that I am to pack up, bag and baggage, and take myself elsewhere. Cousin William is one of those persons who are willing to do everything except what they are wanted to do. He will go on talking about the Belton estate, when I want to know whether I may really look for as much as twelve shillings a week to live upon."

"He wants me to speak to you about—about the earnest love he bears for you."

"Oh dear! Mary;—could you not suppose it all to be said? It is an old trouble, and need not be repeated."

"No," said Mary, "I cannot suppose it to be all said." Clara looking up as she heard the voice, was astonished both by the fire in the woman's eye and by the force of her tone. "I will not think so meanly of you as to believe that such words from such a man can be passed

by as meaning nothing. I will not say that you ought to be able to love him; in that you cannot control your heart; but if you cannot love him, the want of such love ought to make you suffer,—to suffer much and be very sad.”

“I cannot agree to that, Mary.”

“Is all his life nothing, then? Do you know what love means with him;—this love which he bears to you? Do you understand that it is everything to him?—that from the first moment in which he acknowledged to himself that his heart was set upon you, he could not bring himself to set it upon any other thing for a moment? Perhaps you have never understood this; have never perceived that he is so much in earnest, that to him it is more than money, or land, or health,—more than life itself;—that he so loves that he would willingly give everything that he has for his love? Have you known this?”

“Clara would not answer these questions for a while. What if she had known it all, was she therefore bound to sacrifice herself? Could it be the duty of any woman to give her-

self to a man simply because a man wanted her? That was the argument as it was put forward now by Mary Belton.

“Dear, dearest Clara,” said Mary Belton, stretching herself forward from her chair, and putting out her thin, almost transparent, hand, “I do not think that you have thought enough of this; or, perhaps, you have not known it. But his love for you is as I say. To him it is everything. It pervades every hour of every day, every corner in his life! He knows nothing of anything else while he is in his present state.”

“He is very good;—more than good.”

“He is very good.”

“But I do not see that;—that——Of course I know how disinterested he is.”

“Disinterested is a poor word. It insinuates that in such a matter there could be a question of what people call interest.”

“And I know, too, how much he honours me.”

“Honour is a cold word. It is not honour, but love,—downright true, honest love. I

hope he does honour you. I believe you to be an honest, true woman ; and, as he knows you well, he probably does honour you ;—but I am speaking of love.” Again Clara was silent. She knew what should be her argument if she were determined to oppose her cousin’s pleadings ; and she knew also,—she thought she knew,—that she did intend to oppose them ; but there was a coldness in the argument to which she was averse. “ You cannot be insensible to such love as that !” said Mary, going on with the cause which she had in hand.

“ You say that he is fond of me.”

“ Fond of you ! I have not used such trifling expressions as that.”

“ That he loves me.”

“ You know he loves you. Have you ever doubted a word that he has spoken to you on any subject ?”

“ I believe he speaks truly.”

“ You know he speaks truly. He is the very soul of truth.”

“ But, Mary——”

“ Well, Clara ! But remember ; do not

answer me lightly. Do not play with a man's heart because you have it in your power."

"You wrong me. I could never do like that. You tell me that he loves me;—but what if I do not love him? Love will not be constrained. Am I to say that I love him because I believe that he loves me?"

This was the argument, and Clara found herself driven to use it,—not so much from its special applicability to herself, as on account of its general fitness. Whether it did or did not apply to herself she had no time to ask herself at that moment; but she felt that no man could have a right to claim a woman's hand on the strength of his own love,—unless he had been able to win her love. She was arguing on behalf of women in general rather than on her own behalf.

"If you mean to tell me that you cannot love him, of course I must give over," said Mary, not caring at all for men and women in general, but full of anxiety for her brother. "Do you mean to say that,—that you can

never love him ?” It almost seemed, from her face, that she was determined utterly to quarrel with her new-found cousin,—to quarrel and to go at once away if she got an answer that would not please her.

“Dear Mary, do not press me so hard.”

“But I want to press you hard. It is not right that he should lose his life in longing and hoping.”

“He will not lose his life, Mary.”

“I hope not ;—not if I can help it. I trust that he will be strong enough to get rid of his trouble,—to put it down and trample it under his feet.” Clara, as she heard this, began to ask herself what it was that was to be trampled under Will’s feet. “I think he will be man enough to overcome his passion ; and then, perhaps,—you may regret what you have lost.”

“Now you are unkind to me.”

“Well ; what would you have me say ? Do I not know that he is offering you the best gift that he can give ? Did I not begin by swearing to you that he loved you with a

passion of love that cannot but be flattering to you? If it is to be love in vain, this to him is a great misfortune. And, yet, when I say that I hope that he will recover, you tell me that I am unkind."

"No;—not for that."

"May I tell him to come and plead for himself?"

Again Clara was silent, not knowing how to answer that last question. And when she did answer it, she answered it thoughtlessly. "Of course he knows that he can do that."

"He says that he has been forbidden."

"Oh, Mary, what am I to say to you? You know it all, and I wonder that you can continue to question me in this way."

"Know all what?"

"That I have been engaged to Captain Aylmer."

"But you are not engaged to him now."

"No—I am not."

"And there can be no renewal there, I suppose?"

"Oh, no!"

“Not even for my brother would I say a word if I thought——”

“No;—there is nothing of that; but—. If you cannot understand, I do not think that I can explain it.” It seemed to Clara that her cousin, in her anxiety for her brother, did not conceive that a woman, even if she could suddenly transfer her affections from one man to another, could not bring herself to say that she had done so.

“I must write to him to-day,” said Mary, “and I must give him some answer. Shall I tell him that he had better not come here till you are gone?”

“That will perhaps be best,” said Clara.

“Then he will never come at all.”

“I can go;—can go at once. I will go at once. You shall never have to say that my presence prevented his coming to his own house. I ought not to be here. I know it now. I will go away, and you may tell him that I am gone.”

“No, dear; you will not go.”

“Yes;—I must go. I fancied things

might be otherwise, because he once told me that—he—would—be—a brother to me. And I said I would hold him to that;—not only because I want a brother so badly, but because I love him so dearly. But it cannot be like that.”

“You do not think that he will ever desert you?”

“But I will go away, so that he may come to his own house. I ought not to be here. Of course I ought not to be at Belton,—either in this house or in any other. Tell him that I will be gone before he can come, and tell him also that I will not be too proud to accept from him what it may be fit that he should give me. I have no one but him;—no one but him;—no one but him.” Then she burst into tears, and throwing back her head, covered her face with her hands.

Miss Belton, upon this, rose slowly from the chair on which she was sitting, and making her way painfully across to Clara, stood leaning on the weeping girl's chair. “You shall not go while I am here,” she said.

“ Yes ; I must go. He cannot come till I am gone.”

“ Think of it all once again, Clara. May I not tell him to come, and that while he is coming you will see if you cannot soften your heart towards him ?”

“ Soften my heart ! Oh, if I could only harden it !”

“ He would wait. If you would only bid him wait, he would be so happy in waiting.”

“ Yes ;—till to-morrow morning. I know him. Hold out your little finger to him, and he has your whole hand and arm in a moment.”

“ I want you to say that you will try to love him.”

But Clara was in truth trying not to love him. She was ashamed of herself because she did love the one man, when, but a few weeks since, she had confessed that she loved another. She had mistaken herself and her own feelings, not in reference to her cousin, but in supposing that she could really have sympathised with such a man as Captain Aylmer. It was

necessary to her self-respect that she should be punished because of that mistake. She could not save herself from this condemnation,—she would not grant herself a respite,—because, by doing so, she would make another person happy. Had Captain Aylmer never crossed her path, she would have given her whole heart to her cousin. Nay; she had so given it,—had done so, although Captain Aylmer had crossed her path and come in her way. But it was matter of shame to her to find that this had been possible, and she could not bring herself to confess her shame.

The conversation at last ended, as such conversations always do end, without any positive decision. Mary wrote of course to her brother, but Clara was not told of the contents of the letter. We, however, may know them, and may understand their nature, without learning above two lines of the letter. “If you can be content to wait awhile, you will succeed,” said Mary; “but when were you ever content to wait for anything?” “If there is anything I hate, it is waiting,” said

Will, when he received the letter ; nevertheless the letter made him happy, and he went about his farm with a sanguine heart, as he arranged matters for another absence. “ Away long ? ” he said, in answer to a question asked him by his head man ; “ how on earth can I say how long I shall be away ? You can go on well enough without me by this time, I should think. You will have to learn, for there is no knowing how often I may be away, or for how long.”

When Mary said that the letter had been written, Clara again spoke about going. “ And where will you go ? ” said Mary.

“ I will take a lodging in Taunton.”

“ He would only follow you there, and there would be more trouble. That would be all. He must act as your guardian, and in that capacity, at any rate, you must submit to him.” Clara, therefore, consented to remain at Belton ; but, before Will arrived, she returned from the house to the cottage.

“ Of course I understand all about it,” said Mrs. Askerton ; “ and let me tell you this,—

that if it is not all settled within a week from his coming here, I shall think that you are without a heart. He is to be knocked about, and cuffed, and kept from his work, and made to run up and down between here and Norfolk, because you cannot bring yourself to confess that you have been a fool."

"I have never said that I have not been a fool," said Clara.

"You have made a mistake,—as young women will do sometimes, even when they are as prudent and circumspect as you are,—and now you don't quite like the task of putting it right."

It was all true, and Clara knew that it was true. The putting right of mistakes is never pleasant; and in this case it was so unpleasant that she could not bring herself to acknowledge that it must be done. And yet, I think, that by this time, she was aware of the necessity.

CHAPTER IX.

TAKING POSSESSION.

“I WANT her to have it all,” said William Belton to Mr. Green, the lawyer, when they came to discuss the necessary arrangements for the property.

“But that would be absurd.”

“Never mind. It is what I wish. I suppose a man may do what he likes with his own.”

“She won’t take it,” said the lawyer.

“She must take it, if you manage the matter properly,” said Will.

“I don’t suppose it will make much difference,” said the lawyer,—“now that Captain Aylmer is out of the running.”

“I know nothing about that. Of course I am very glad that he should be out of the running, as you call it. He is a bad sort of fellow, and I didn’t want him to have the property. But all that has had nothing to do with it. I’m not doing it because I think she is ever to be my wife.”

From this the reader will understand that Belton was still fidgeting himself and the lawyer about the estate when he passed through London. The matter in dispute, however, was so important that he was induced to seek the advice of others besides Mr. Green, and at last was brought to the conclusion that it was his paramount duty to become Belton of Belton. There seemed in the minds of all these councillors to be some imperative and almost imperious requirement that the acres should go back to a man of his name. Now, as there was no one else of the family who could stand in his way, he had no alternative but to become Belton of Belton. He would, however, sell his estate in Norfolk, and raise money for endowing Clara with

commensurate riches. Such was his own plan ;—but having fallen among counsellors he would not exactly follow his own plan, and at last submitted to an arrangement in accordance with which an annuity of eight hundred pounds a year was to be settled upon Clara, and this was to lie as a charge upon the estate in Norfolk.

“It seems to me to be very shabby,” said William Belton.

“It seems to me to be very extravagant,” said the leader among the counsellors. “She is not entitled to sixpence.”

But at last the arrangement as above described was the one to which they all assented.

When Belton reached the house which was now his own he found no one there but his sister. Clara was at the cottage. As he had been told that she was to return there, he had no reason to be annoyed. But, nevertheless, he was annoyed, or rather discontented, and had not been a quarter of an hour about the place before he declared his intention to go and seek her.

“Do no such thing, Will; pray do not,” said his sister.

“And why not?”

“Because it will be better that you should wait. You will only injure yourself and her by being impetuous.”

“But it is absolutely necessary that she should know her own position. It would be cruelty to keep her in ignorance;—though for the matter of that I shall be ashamed to tell her. Yes;—I shall be ashamed to look her in the face. What will she think of it after I had assured her that she should have the whole?”

“But she would not have taken it, Will. And had she done so, she would have been very wrong. Now she will be comfortable.”

“I wish I could be comfortable,” said he.

“If you will only wait——”

“I hate waiting. I do not see what good it will do. Besides, I don’t mean to say anything about that,—not to-day, at least. I don’t indeed. As for being here and not seeing her, that is out of the question. Of

course she would think that I had quarrelled with her, and that I meant to take everything to myself, now that I have the power."

"She won't suspect you of wishing to quarrel with her, Will."

"I should in her place. It is out of the question that I should be here, and not go to her. It would be monstrous. I will wait till they have done lunch, and then I will go up."

It was at last decided that he should walk up to the cottage, call upon Colonel Askerton, and ask to see Clara in the Colonel's presence. It was thought that he could make his statement about the money better before a third person who could be regarded as Clara's friend, than could possibly be done between themselves. He did, therefore, walk across to the cottage, and was shown into Colonel Askerton's study.

"There he is," Mrs. Askerton said, as soon as she heard the sound of the bell. "I knew that he would come at once."

During the whole morning Mrs. Askerton

had been insisting that Belton would make his appearance on that very day,—the day of his arrival at Belton, and Clara had been asserting that he would not do so.

“Why should he come?” Clara had said.

“Simply to take you to his own house, like any other of his goods and chattels.”

“I am not his goods or his chattels.”

“But you soon will be; and why shouldn’t you accept your lot quietly? He is Belton of Belton, and everything here belongs to him.”

“I do not belong to him.”

“What nonsense! When a man has the command of the situation, as he has, he can do just what he pleases. If he were to come and carry you off by violence, I have no doubt the Beltonians would assist him, and say that he was right. And you of course would forgive him. Belton of Belton may do anything.”

“That is nonsense, if you please.”

“Indeed if you had any of that decent feeling of feminine inferiority which ought to

belong to all women, he would have found you sitting on the door-step of his house waiting for him."

That had been said early in the morning, when they first knew that he had arrived; but they had been talking about him ever since,—talking about him under pressure from Mrs. Askerton, till Clara had been driven to long that she might be spared. If he chooses to come, he will come," she said. "Of course he will come," Mrs. Askerton had answered, and then they heard the ring of the bell. "There he is. I could swear to the sound of his foot. Doesn't he step as though he were Belton of Belton, and conscious that everything belonged to him?" Then there was a pause. "He has been shown in to Colonel Askerton. What on earth could he want with him?"

"He has called to tell him something about the cottage," said Clara, endeavouring to speak as though she were calm through it all.

"Cottage! Fiddlestick! The idea of a man coming to look after his trumpery cottage

on the first day of his own property ! Perhaps he is demanding that you shall be delivered up to him. If he does I shall vote for obeying."

"And I for disobeying,—and shall vote very strongly too."

Their suspense was yet prolonged for another ten minutes, and at the end of that time the servant came in and asked if Miss Amedroz would be good enough to go into the master's room. "Mr. Belton is there, Fanny?" asked Mrs. Askerton. The girl confessed that Mr. Belton was there, and then Clara, without another word, got up and left the room. She had much to do in assuming a look of composure before she opened the door; but she made the effort, and was not unsuccessful. In another second she found her hand in her cousin's, and his bright eye was fixed upon her with that eager friendly glance which made his face so pleasant to those whom he loved.

"Your cousin has been telling me of the arrangements he has been making for you

with the lawyers," said Colonel Askerton. "I can only say that I wish all the ladies had cousins so liberal, and so able to be liberal."

"I thought I would see Colonel Askerton first, as you are staying at his house. And as for liberality,—there is nothing of the kind. You must understand, Clara, that a fellow can't do what he likes with his own in this country. I have found myself so bullied by lawyers and that sort of people, that I have been obliged to yield to them. I wanted that you should have the old place, to do just what you pleased with it.

"That was out of the question, Will."

"Of course it was," said Colonel Askerton. Then, as Belton himself did not proceed to the telling of his own story, the Colonel told it for him, and explained what was the income which Clara was to receive.

"But that is as much out of the question," said she, "as the other. I cannot rob you in that way. I cannot and I shall not. And why should I? What do I want with an income? Something I ought to have, if only

for the credit of the family, and that I am willing to take from your kindness ; but——”

“It’s all settled now, Clara.”

“I don’t think that you can lessen the weight of your obligation, Miss Amedroz, after what has been done up in London,” said the Colonel.

“If you had said a hundred a year——”

“I have been allowed to say nothing,” said Belton ; “those people have said eight,—and so it is settled. When are you coming over to see Mary?”

To this question he got no definite answer, and as he went away immediately afterwards he hardly seemed to expect one. He did not even ask for Mrs. Askerton, and as that lady remarked, behaved altogether like a bear. “But what a munificent bear!” she said. “Fancy ;—eight hundred a year of your own. One begins to doubt whether it is worth one’s while to marry at all with such an income as that to do what one likes with ! However, it all means nothing. It will all be his own again before you have even touched it.”

“You must not say anything more about that,” said Clara gravely.

“And why must I not?”

“Because I shall hear nothing more of it. There is an end of all that,—as there ought to be.”

“Why an end? I don’t see an end. There will be no end till Belton of Belton has got you and your eight hundred a year as well as everything else.”

“You will find that—he—does not mean—anything—more,” said Clara.

“You think not?”

“I am—sure of it.” Then there was a little sound in her throat as though she were in some danger of being choked; but she soon recovered herself, and was able to express herself clearly. “I have only one favour to ask you now, Mrs. Askerton, and that is that you will never say anything more about him. He has changed his mind. Of course he has, or he would not come here like that and have gone away without saying a word.”

“Not a word! A man gives you eight

hundred a year, and that is not saying a word !”

“Not a word except about money ! But of course he is right. I know that he is right. After what has passed he would be very wrong to—to—think about it any more. You joke about his being Belton of Belton. But it does make a difference.”

“It does ;—does it ?”

“It has made a difference. I see and feel it now. I shall never—hear him—ask me—that question—any more.”

“And if you did hear him, what answer would you make him ?”

“I don’t know.”

“That is just it. Women are so cross-grained that it is a wonder to me that men should ever have anything to do with them. They have about them some madness of a phantasy which they dignify with the name of feminine pride, and under the cloak of this they believe themselves to be justified in tormenting their lovers’ lives out. The only consolation is that they torment themselves as

much. Can anything be more cross-grained than you are at this moment? You were resolved just now that it would be the most unbecoming thing in the world if he spoke a word more about his love for the next twelve months——”

“Mrs. Askerton, I said nothing about twelve months.”

“And now you are broken-hearted because he did not blurt it all out before Colonel Askerton in a business interview, which was very properly had at once, and in which he has had the exceeding good taste to confine himself altogether to the one subject.”

“I am not complaining.”

“It was good taste; though if he had not been a bear he might have asked after me, who am fighting his battles for him night and day.”

“But what will he do next?”

“Eat his dinner, I should think, as it is now nearly five o'clock. Your father used always to dine at five.”

“I can't go to see Mary,” she said, “till he comes here again.”

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“He will be here fast enough. I shouldn’t wonder if he was to come here to night.’ And he did come again that night.

When Belton’s interview was over in the Colonel’s study, he left the house,—without even asking after the mistress, as that mistress had taken care to find out,—and went off, rambling about the estate which was now his own. It was a beautiful place, and he was not insensible to the gratification of being its owner. There is much in the glory of ownership,—of the ownership of land and houses, of beeves and woolly flocks, of wide fields and thick-growing woods, even when that ownership is of late date, when it conveys to the owner nothing but the realisation of a property on the soil ; but there is much more in it when it contains the memories of old years ; when the glory is the glory of race as well as the glory of power and property. There had been Beltons of Belton living there for many centuries, and now he was the Belton of the day, standing on his own ground,—the descendant and representative of the Beltons of old,—Belton of Belton

without a flaw in his pedigree! He felt himself to be proud of his position,—prouder than he could have been of any other that might have been vouchsafed to him. And yet amidst it all he was somewhat ashamed of his pride. “The man who can do it for himself is the real man after all,” he said. “But I have got it by a fluke,—and by such a sad chance too!” Then he wandered on, thinking of the circumstances under which the property had fallen into his hands, and remembering how and when and where the first idea had occurred to him of making Clara Amedroz his wife. He had then felt that if he could only do that he could reconcile himself to the heirship. And the idea had grown upon him instantly, and had become a passion by the eagerness with which he had welcomed it. From that day to this he had continued to tell himself that he could not enjoy his good fortune unless he could enjoy it with her. There had come to be a horrid impediment in his way,—a barrier which had seemed to have been placed there by his evil fortune, to compensate the gifts

given to him by his good fortune, and that barrier had been Captain Aylmer. He had not, in fact, seen much of his rival, but he had seen enough to make it matter of wonder to him that Clara could be attached to such a man. He had thoroughly despised Captain Aylmer, and had longed to show his contempt of the man by kicking him out of the hotel at the London railway station. At that moment all the world had seemed to him to be wrong and wretched.

But now it seemed that all the world might so easily be made right again! The impediment had got itself removed. Belton did not even yet altogether comprehend by what means Clara had escaped from the meshes of the Aylmer Park people, but he did know that she had escaped. Her eyes had been opened before it was too late, and she was a free woman,—to be compassed if only a man might compass her. While she had been engaged to Captain Aylmer, Will had felt that she was not assailable. Though he had not been quite able to restrain himself,—as on that fatal occa-

sion when he had taken her in his arms and kissed her,—still he had known that as she was an engaged woman, he could not, without insulting her, press his own suit upon her. But now all that was over. Let him say what he liked on that head, she would have no proper plea for anger. She was assailable;—and, as this was so, why the mischief should he not set about the work at once? His sister bade him to wait. Why should he wait when one fortunate word might do it? Wait! He could not wait. How are you to bid a starving man to wait when you put him down at a well-covered board? Here was he, walking about Belton Park,—just where she used to walk with him;—and there was she at Belton Cottage, within half an hour of him at this moment, if he were to go quickly; and yet Mary was telling him to wait! No; he would not wait. There could be no reason for waiting. Wait, indeed, till some other Captain Aylmer should come in the way and give him more trouble!

So he wandered on, resolving that he would

see his cousin again that very day. Such an interview as that which had just taken place between two such dear friends was not natural,—was not to be endured. What might not Clara think of it! To meet her for the first time after her escape from Aylmer Park, and to speak to her only on matters concerning money! He would certainly go to her again on that afternoon. In his walking he came to the bottom of the rising ground on the top of which stood the rock on which he and Clara had twice sat. But he turned away, and would not go up to it. He hoped that he might go up to it very soon,—but, except under certain circumstances, he would never go up to it again.

“I am going across to the cottage immediately after dinner,” he said to his sister.

“Have you an appointment?”

“No; I have no appointment. I suppose a man doesn’t want an appointment to go and see his own cousin down in the country.”

“I don’t know what their habits are.”

“I shan’t ask to go in; but I want to see her.”

Mary looked at him with loving, sorrowing eyes, but she said no more. She loved him so well that she would have given her right hand to get for him what he wanted ;—but she sorrowed to think that he should want such a thing so sorely. Immediately after his dinner, he took his hat and went out without saying a word further, and made his way once more across to the gate of the cottage. It was a lovely summer evening, at that period of the year in which our summer evenings just begin, when the air is sweeter and the flowers more fragrant, and the forms of the foliage more lovely than at any other time. It was now eight o'clock, but it was hardly as yet evening ; none at least of the gloom of evening had come, though the sun was low in the heavens. At the cottage they were all sitting out on the lawn ; and as Belton came near he was seen by them, and he saw them.

“ I told you so,” said Mrs. Askerton, to Clara, in a whisper.

“ He is not coming in,” Clara answered.
“ He is going on.”

But when he had come nearer, Colonel Askerton called to him over the garden paling, and asked him to join them. He was now standing within ten or fifteen yards of them, though the fence divided them. "I have come to ask my cousin Clara to take a walk with me," he said. "She can be back by your tea time." He made his request very placidly, and did not in any way look like a lover.

"I am sure she will be glad to go," said Mrs. Askerton. But Clara said nothing.

"Do take a turn with me, if you are not tired," said he.

"She has not been out all day, and cannot be tired," said Mrs. Askerton, who had now walked up to the paling. "Clara, get your hat. But, Mr. Belton, what have I done that I am to be treated in this way? Perhaps you don't remember that you have not spoken to me since your arrival."

"Upon my word, I beg your pardon," said he, endeavouring to stretch his hand across the bushes. "I forgot I didn't see you this morning."

“I suppose I mustn’t be angry, as this is your day of taking possession ; but it is exactly on such days as this that one likes to be remembered.”

“I didn’t mean to forget you, Mrs. Asker-ton ; I didn’t, indeed. And as for the special day, that’s all bosh, you know. I haven’t taken particular possession of anything that I know of.”

“I hope you will, Mr. Belton, before the day is over,” said she. Clara had at length arisen, and had gone into the house to fetch her hat. She had not spoken a word, and even yet her cousin did not know whether she was coming. “I hope you will take possession of a great deal that is very valuable. Clara has gone to get her hat.”

“Do you think she means to walk ?”

“I think she does, Mr. Belton. And there she is at the door. Mind you bring her back to tea.”

Clara, as she came forth, felt herself quite unable to speak, or walk, or look after her usual manner. She knew herself to be a

victim,—to be so far a victim that she could no longer control her own fate. To Captain Aylmer, at any rate, she had never succumbed. In all her dealings with him she had fought upon an equal footing. She had never been compelled to own herself mastered. But now she was being led out that she might confess her own submission, and acknowledge that hitherto she had not known what was good for her. She knew that she would have to yield. She must have known how happy she was to have an opportunity of yielding; but yet,—yet, had there been any room for choice, she thought she would have refrained from walking with her cousin that evening. She had wept that afternoon because she had thought that he would not come again; and now that he had come at the first moment that was possible for him, she was almost tempted to wish him once more away.

“I suppose you understand that when I came up this morning I came merely to talk about business,” said Belton, as soon as they were off together.

“It was very good of you to come at all so soon after your arrival.”

“I told those people in London that I would have it all settled at once, and so I wanted to have it off my mind.”

“I don’t know what I ought to say to you. Of course I shall not want so much money as that.”

“We won’t talk about the money any more to-day. I hate talking about money.”

“It is not the pleasantest subject in the world.”

“No,” said he; “no indeed. I hate it,—particularly between friends. So you have come to grief with your friends, the Aylmers?”

“I hope I haven’t come to grief,—and the Aylmers, as a family, never were my friends. I’m obliged to contradict you, point by point,—you see.”

“I don’t like Captain Aylmer at all,” said Will, after a pause.

“So I saw Will; and I dare say he was not very fond of you.”

“Fond of me! I didn’t want him to be

fond of me. I don't suppose he ever thought much about me. I could not help thinking of him."—She had nothing to say to this, and therefore walked on silently by his side. "I suppose he has not any idea of coming back here again?"

"What; to Belton? No I do not think he will come to Belton any more."

"Nor will you go to Aylmer Park?"

"No; certainly not. Of all the places on earth, Will, to which you could send me, Aylmer Park is the one to which I should go most unwillingly."

"I don't want to send you there."

"You never could be made to understand what a woman she is; how disagreeable, how cruel, how imperious, how insolent."

"Was she so bad as all that?"

"Indeed she was, Will. I can't but tell the truth to you."

"And he was nearly as bad as she."

"No, Will; no; do not say that of him."

"He was such a quarrelsome fellow. He

flew at me just because I said we had good hunting down in Norfolk."

"We need not talk about all that, Will."

"No;—of course not. It's all passed and gone, I suppose."

"Yes;—it is all passed and gone. You did not know my Aunt Winterfield, or you would understand my first reason for liking him."

"No," said Will; "I never saw her."

Then they walked on together for a while without speaking, and Clara was beginning to feel some relief,—some relief at first; but as the relief came, there came back to her the dead, dull, feeling of heaviness at her heart which had oppressed her after his visit in the morning. She had been right, and Mrs. Askerton had been wrong. He had returned to her simply as her cousin, and now he was walking with her and talking to her in this strain, to teach her that it was so. But of a sudden they came to a place where two paths diverged, and he turned upon her and asked her quickly which path they should take. "Look, Clara," he said, "will you go up there

with me?" It did not need that she should look, as she knew that the way indicated by him led up among the rocks.

"I don't much care which way," she said, faintly,

"Do you not? But I do. I care very much. Don't you remember where that path goes?" She had no answer to give to this. She remembered well, and remembered how he had protested that he would never go to the place again unless he could go there as her accepted lover. And she had asked herself sundry questions as to that protestation. Could it be that for her sake he would abstain from visiting the prettiest spot on his estate,—that he would continue to regard the ground as hallowed because of his memories of her? "Which way shall we go?" he asked.

"I suppose it does not much signify," said she, trembling.

"But it does signify. It signifies very much to me. Will you go up to the rocks?"

"I am afraid we shall be late, if we stay out long."

“What matters how late? Will you come?”

“I suppose so,—if you wish it, Will.”

She had anticipated that the high rock was to be the altar at which the victim was to be sacrificed; but now he would not wait till he had taken her to the sacred spot. He had of course intended that he would there renew his offer; but he had perceived that his offer had been renewed, and had, in fact, been accepted, during this little parley as to the pathway. There was hardly any necessity for further words. So he must have thought; for, as quick as lightning, he flung his arms around her, and kissed her again, as he had kissed her on that other terrible occasion,—that occasion on which he had felt that he might hardly hope for pardon.

“William, William,” she said; “how can you serve me like that?” But he had a full understanding as to his own privileges, and was well aware that he was in the right now, as he had been before that he was trespassing egregiously. “Why are you so rough with me?” she said.

“Clara, say that you love me.”

“I will say nothing to you because you are so rough.”

“They were now walking up slowly towards the rocks. And as he had his arm round her waist, he was contented for awhile to allow her to walk without speaking. But when they were on the summit it was necessary for him that he should have a word from her of positive assurance. “Clara, say that you love me.”

“Have I not always loved you, Will, since almost the first moment that I saw you?”

“But that won’t do. You know that is not fair. Come, Clara; I’ve had a deal of trouble,—and grief too; haven’t I? You should say a word to make up for it;—that is, if you can say it.”

“What can a word like that signify to you to-day? You have got everything.

“Have I got you?” Still she paused. “I will have an answer. Have I got you? Are you now my own?”

“I suppose so, Will. Don’t now. I will

not have it again. Does not that satisfy you?"

"Tell me that you love me."

"You know that I love you."

"Better than anybody in the world?"

"Yes;—better than anybody in the world."

"And after all you will be—my wife?"

"Oh, Will,—how you question one!"

"You shall say it, and then it will all be fair and honest."

"Say what? I'm sure I thought I had said everything."

"Say that you mean to be my wife."

"I suppose so,—if you wish it."

"Wish it!" said he, getting up from his seat, and throwing his hat into the bushes on one side; "wish it! I don't think you have ever understood how I have wished it. Look here, Clara; I found when I got down to Norfolk that I couldn't live without you. Upon my word it is true. I don't suppose you'll believe me."

"I didn't think it could be so bad with you as that."

“No ;—I don’t suppose women ever do believe. And I wouldn’t have believed it of myself. I hated myself for it. By George, I did. That is when I began to think it was all up with me.”

“All up with you ! Oh, Will !”

“I had quite made up my mind to go to New Zealand. I had, indeed. I couldn’t have kept my hands off that man if we had been living in the same country. I should have wrung his neck.”

“Will, how can you talk so wickedly ?”

“There’s no understanding it till you have felt it. But never mind. It’s all right now ; isn’t it, Clara ?”

“If you think so.”

“Think so ! Oh, Clara, I am such a happy fellow. Do give me a kiss. You have never given me one kiss yet.”

“What nonsense ! I didn’t think you were such a baby.”

“By George, but you shall ;—or you shall never get home to tea to-night. My own, own, own darling. Upon my word, Clara, when

I begin to think about it I shall be half mad."

"I think you are quite that already."

"No, I'm not;—but I shall be when I'm alone. What can I say to you, Clara, to make you understand how much I love you? You remember the song, 'For Bonnie Annie Laurie I'd lay me down and dee.' Of course it is all nonsense talking of dying for a woman. What a man has to do is to live for her. But that is my feeling. I'm ready to give you my life. If there was anything to do for you, I'd do it if I could, whatever it was. Do you understand me?"

"Dear Will! Dearest Will!"

"Am I dearest?"

"Are you not sure of it?"

"But I like you to tell me so. I like to feel that you are not ashamed to own it. You ought to say it a few times to me, as I have said it so very often to you."

"You'll hear enough of it before you've done with me."

"I shall never have heard enough of it."

Oh, Heavens, only think, when I was coming down in the train last night I was in such a bad way."

"And are you in a good way now?"

"Yes; in a very good way. I shall crow over Mary so when I get home."

"And what has poor Mary done?"

"Never mind."

"I dare say she knows what is good for you better than you know yourself. I suppose she has told you that you might do a great deal better than trouble yourself with a wife?"

"Never mind what she has told me. It is settled now;—is it not?"

"I hope so, Will."

"But not quite settled as yet. When shall it be? That is the next question."

But to that question Clara positively refused to make any reply that her lover would consider to be satisfactory. He continued to press her till she was at last driven to remind him how very short a time it was since her father had been among them; and then he was very angry with himself, and declared himself to be

a brute. "Anything but that," she said. "You are the kindest and the best of men;—but at the same time the most impatient."

"That's what Mary says; but what's the good of waiting? She wanted me to wait to-day."

"And as you would not, you have fallen into a trap out of which you can never escape. But pray let us go. What will they think of us?"

"I shouldn't wonder if they didn't think something near the truth."

"Whatever they think, we will go back. It is ever so much past nine."

"Before you stir, Clara, tell me one thing. Are you really happy?"

"Very happy."

"And are you glad that this has been done?"

"Very glad. Will that satisfy you?"

"And you do love me?"

"I do—I do—I do. Can I say more than that?"

"More than anybody else in the world?"

“ Better than all the world put together.”

“ Then,” said he, holding her tight in his arms, “ show me that you love me.” And as he made his request he was quick to explain to her what, according to his ideas, was the becoming mode by which lovers might show their love. I wonder whether it ever occurred to Clara, as she thought of it all before she went to bed that night, that Captain Aylmer and William Belton were very different in their manners. And if so, I must wonder further whether she most approved the manners of the patient man or the man who was impatient.

CHAPTER X.

CONCLUSION.

ABOUT two months after the scene described in the last chapter, when the full summer had arrived, Clara received two letters from the two lovers, the history of whose loves have just been told, and these shall be submitted to the reader, as they will serve to explain the manner in which the two men proposed to arrange their affairs. We will first have Captain Aylmer's letter, which was the first read; Clara kept the latter for the last, as children always keep their sweetest morsels.

“ Aylmer Park, August, 186—.

“ MY DEAR MISS AMEDROZ,

“ I heard before leaving London that you are engaged to marry your cousin Mr. William

Belton, and I think that perhaps you may be satisfied to have a line from me to let you know that I quite approve of the marriage."

"I do not care very much for his approval or disapproval," said Clara as she read this. "No doubt it will be the best thing you can do, especially as it will heal all the sores arising from the entail." "There never was any sore," said Clara. "Pray give my compliments to Mr. Belton, and offer him my congratulations, and tell him that I wish him all happiness in the married state." "Married fiddlestick!" said Clara. In this she was unreasonable; but the euphonious platitudes of Captain Aylmer were so unlike the vehement protestations of Mr. Belton that she must be excused if by this time she had come to entertain something of an unreasonable aversion for the former.

"I hope you will not receive my news with perfect indifference when I tell you that I also am going to be married. The lady is one whom I have known for a long time, and have always esteemed very highly. She is Lady

Emily Tagmaggert, the youngest daughter of the Earl of Mull." Why Clara should immediately have conceived a feeling of supreme contempt for Lady Emily Tagmaggert, and assured herself that her ladyship was a thin, dry, cross old maid with a red nose, I cannot explain; but I do know that such were her thoughts, almost instantaneously, in reference to Captain Aylmer's future bride. "Lady Emily is a very intimate friend of my sister's; and you, who know how our family cling together, will feel how thankful I must be when I tell you that my mother quite approves of the engagement. I suppose we shall be married early in the spring. We shall probably spend some months every year at Perivale, and I hope that we may look forward to the pleasure of seeing you sometimes as a guest beneath our roof." On reading this Clara shuddered, and made some inward protestation which seemed to imply that she had no wish whatever to revisit the dull streets of the little town with which she had been so well acquainted. "I hope she'll be

good to poor Mr. Possit," said Clara, "and give him port wine on Sundays."

"I have one more thing that I ought to say. You will remember that I intended to pay my aunt's legacy immediately after her death, but that I was prevented by circumstances which I could not control. I have paid it now into Mr. Green's hands on your account, together with the sum of £59 18s. 3d., which is due upon it as interest at the rate of five per cent. I hope that this may be satisfactory." "It is not satisfactory at all," said Clara, putting down the letter, and resolving that Will Belton should be instructed to repay the money instantly. It may, however, be explained here that in this matter Clara was doomed to be disappointed; and that she was forced, by Mr. Green's arguments, to receive the money. "Then it shall go to the hospital at Perivale," she declared when those arguments were used. As to that, Mr. Green was quite indifferent, but I do not think that the legacy which troubled poor Aunt Winterfield so much on her dying

bed was ultimately applied to so worthy a purpose.

“And now, my dear Miss Amedroz,” continued the letter, “I will say farewell, with many assurances of my unaltered esteem, and with heartfelt wishes for your future happiness. Believe me to be always,

“Most faithfully and sincerely yours,

FREDERIC F. AYLMER.”

“Esteem!” said Clara, as she finished the letter. “I wonder which he esteems the most, me or Lady Emily Tagmaggert. He will never get beyond esteem with any one.”

The letter which was last read was as follows:—

“Plaistow, August, 186—.

“DEAREST CLARA,

“I don’t think I shall ever get done, and I am coming to hate farming. It is awful lonely here, too, and I pass all my evenings by myself, wondering why I should be doomed to this kind of thing, while you and Mary are comfortable together at Belton. We have

begun with the wheat, and as soon as that is safe I shall cut and run. I shall leave the barley to Bunce. Bunce knows as much about it as I do,—and as for remaining here all the summer, it's out of the question.

“My own dear, darling love, of course I don't intend to urge you to do anything that you don't like; but upon my honour I don't see the force of what you say. You know I have as much respect for your father's memory as anybody, but what harm can it do to him that we should be married at once? Don't you think he would have wished it himself? It can be ever so quiet. So long as it's done, I don't care a straw how it's done. Indeed, for the matter of that, I always think it would be best just to walk to church and to walk home again without saying anything to anybody. I hate fuss and nonsense, and really I don't think anybody would have a right to say anything if we were to do it at once in that sort of way. I have had a bad time of it for the last twelvemonth. You must allow that, and I think that I ought to be rewarded.

“As for living, you shall have your choice. Indeed you shall live anywhere you please ;— at Timbuctoo if you like it. I don’t want to give up Plaistow, because my father and grandfather farmed the land themselves ; but I am quite prepared not to live here. I don’t think it would suit you, because it has so much of the farm-house about it. Only I should like you sometimes to come and look at the old place. What I should like would be to pull down the house at Belton and build another. But you mustn’t propose to put it off till that’s done, as I should never have the heart to do it. If you think that would suit you, I’ll make up my mind to live at Belton for a constancy ; and then I’d go in for a lot of cattle, and don’t doubt I’d make a fortune. I’m almost sick of looking at the straight ridges in the big square fields every day of my life.

“Give my love to Mary. I hope she fights my battle for me. Pray think of all this, and relent if you can. I do so long to have an end of this purgatory. If there was any use, I wouldn’t say a word ; but there’s no good

in being tortured, when there is no use. God bless you, dearest love. I do love you so well!

Yours most affectionately,

W. BELTON."

She kissed the letter twice, pressed it to her bosom, and then sat silent for half an hour thinking of it;—of it, and the man who wrote it, and of the man who had written the other letter. She could not but remember how that other man had thought to treat her, when it was his intention and her intention that they two should join their lots together;—how cold he had been; how full of caution and council; how he had preached to her himself and threatened her with the preaching of his mother; how manifestly he had purposed to make her life a sacrifice to his life; how he had premeditated her incarceration at Perivale, while he should be living a bachelor's life in London! Will Belton's ideas of married life were very different. Only come to me at once, —now, immediately, and everything else shall

be disposed just as you please. This was his offer. What he proposed to give,—or rather his willingness to be thus generous, was very sweet to her; but it was not half so sweet as his impatience in demanding his reward. How she doted on him because he considered his present state to be a purgatory! How could she refuse anything she could give to one who desired her gifts so strongly?

As for her future residence, it would be a matter of indifference to her where she should live, so long as she might live with him; but for him,—she felt that but one spot in the world was fit for him. He was Belton of Belton, and it would not be becoming that he should live elsewhere. Of course she would go with him to Plaistow Hall as often as he might wish it; but Belton Castle should be his permanent resting place. It would be her duty to be proud for him, and therefore, for his sake, she would beg that their home might be in Somersetshire.

“Mary,” she said to her cousin soon afterwards, “Will sends his love to you.”

“And what else does he say?”

“I couldn’t tell you everything. You shouldn’t expect it.”

“I don’t expect it; but perhaps there may be something to be told.”

“Nothing that I need tell,—specially. You, who know him so well can imagine what he would say.”

“Dear Will! I am sure he would mean to write what was pleasant.”

Then the matter would have dropped had Clara been so minded,—but she, in truth, was anxious to be forced to talk about the letter. She wished to be urged by Mary to do that which Will urged her to do;—or, at least, to learn whether Mary thought that her brother’s wish might be gratified without impropriety. “Don’t you think we ought to live here?” she said.

“By all means,—if you both like it.”

“He is so good,—so unselfish, that he will only ask me to do what I like best.”

“And which would you like best?”

“I think he ought to live here because it is the old family property. I confess that the name goes for something with me. He says that he would build a new house.”

“Does he think he could have it ready by the time you are married?”

“Ah;—that is just the difficulty. Perhaps, after all, you had better read his letter. I don’t know why I should not show it to you. It will only tell you what you know already,—that he is the most generous fellow in all the world.” Then Mary read the letter. “What am I to say to him?” Clara asked. “It seems so hard to refuse anything to one who is so true, and good, and generous.”

“It is hard.”

“But you see my poor, dear father’s death has been so recent.”

“I hardly know,” said Mary, “how the world feels about such things.”

“I think we ought to wait at least twelve months,” said Clara, very sadly.

“Poor Will! He will be broken-hearted a dozen times before that. But then, when his happiness does come, he will be all the happier.” Clara, when she heard this, almost hated her cousin Mary,—not for her own sake, but on Will’s account. Will trusted so implicitly to his sister, and yet she could not make a better

fight for him than this ! It almost seemed that Mary was indifferent to her brother's happiness. Had Will been her brother, Clara thought, and had any girl asked her advice under similar circumstances, she was sure that she would have answered in a different way. She would have told such girl that her first duty was owing to the man who was to be her husband, and would not have said a word to her about the feeling of the world. After all, what did the feeling of the world signify to them, who were going to be all the world to each other ?

On that afternoon she went up to Mrs. Askerton's ; and succeeded in getting advice from her also, though she did not show Will's letter to that lady. "Of course, I know what he says," said Mrs. Askerton. "Unless I have mistaken the man, he wants to be married to-morrow."

"He is not so bad as that," said Clara.

"Then the next day, or the day after. Of course he is impatient, and does not see any earthly reason why his impatience should not be gratified."

“He is impatient.”

“And I suppose you hesitate because of your father’s death.”

“It seems but the other day ;—does it not ?”
said Clara.

“Everything seems but the other day to me. It was but the other day that I myself was married.”

“And, of course, though I would do anything I could that he would ask me to do——”

“But would you do anything ?”

“Anything that was not wrong I would. Why should I not, when he is so good to me ?”

“Then write to him, my dear, and tell him that it shall be as he wishes it. Believe me, the days of Jacob are over. Men don’t understand waiting now, and it’s always as well to catch your fish when you can.”

“You don’t suppose I have any thought of that kind ?”

“I am sure you have not ;—and I’m sure that he deserves no such thought ;—but the higher that are his deserts, the greater should be his reward. If I were you, I should think

of nothing but him, and I should do exactly as he would have me." Clara kissed her friend as she parted from her, and again resolved that all that woman's sins should be forgiven her. A woman who could give such excellent advice deserved that every sin should be forgiven her. "They'll be married yet before the summer is over," Mrs. Askerton said to her husband that afternoon. "I believe a man may have anything he chooses to ask for, if he'll only ask hard enough."

And they were married in the autumn, if not actually in the summer. With what precise words Clara answered her lover's letter I will not say ; but her answer was of such a nature that he found himself compelled to leave Plaistow, even before the wheat was garnered. Great confidence was placed in Bunce on that occasion, and I have reason to believe that it was not misplaced. They were married in September ;—yes, in September, although that letter of Will's was written in August, and by the beginning of October they had returned from their wedding trip to Plaistow. Clara insisted that she should be taken to Plaistow,

and was very anxious when there to learn all the particulars of the farm. She put down in a little book how many acres there were in each field, and what was the average produce of the land. She made inquiry about four-crop rotation, and endeavoured, with Bunce, to go into the great subject of stall-feeding. But Belton did not give her as much encouragement as he might have done. "We'll come here for the shooting next year," he said; "that is, if there is nothing to prevent us."

"I hope there'll be nothing to prevent us."

"There might be, perhaps; but we'll always come if there is not. For the rest of it, I'll leave it to Bunce, and just run over once or twice in the year. It would not be a nice place for you to live at long."

"I like it of all things. I am quite interested about the farm."

"You'd get very sick of it if you were here in the winter. The truth is that if you farm well, you must farm ugly. The picturesque nooks and corners have all to be turned inside out, and the hedgerows must be abolished,

because we want the sunshine. Now, down at Belton, just about the house, we won't mind farming well, but will stick to the picturesque."

The new house was immediately commenced at Belton, and was made to proceed with all imaginable alacrity. It was supposed at one time,—at least Belton himself said that he so supposed,—that the building would be ready for occupation at the end of the first summer; but this was not found to be possible. "We must put it off till May, after all," said Belton, as he was walking round the unfinished building with Colonel Askerton. "It's an awful bore, but there's no getting people really to pull out in this country."

"I think they've pulled out pretty well. Of course you couldn't have gone into a damp house for the winter."

"Other people can get a house built within twelve months. Look what they do in London."

"And other people with their wives and children die in consequence of colds and sore throats and other evils of that nature. I

wouldn't go into a new house, I know, till I was quite sure it was dry."

As Will at this time was hardly ten months married, he was not as yet justified in thinking about his own wife and children; but he had already found it expedient to make arrangements for the autumn, which would prevent that annual visit to Plaistow which Clara had contemplated, and which he had regarded with his characteristic prudence as being subject to possible impediments. He was to be absent himself for the first week in September, but was to return immediately after that. This he did; and before the end of that month he was justified in talking of his wife and family. "I suppose it wouldn't have done to have been moving now,—under all the circumstances," he said to his friend, Mrs. Askerton, as he still grumbled about the unfinished house.

"I don't think it would have done at all, under all the circumstances," said Mrs. Askerton.

But in the following spring or early summer they did get into the new house;—and a very nice house it was, as will, I think, be believed

by those who have known Mr. William Belton. And when they were well settled, at which time little Will Belton was some seven or eight months old,—little Will, for whom great bonfires had been lit, as though his birth in those parts was a matter not to be regarded lightly; for was he not the first Belton of Belton who had been born there for more than a century?—when that time came visitors appeared at the new Belton Castle, visitors of importance, who were entitled to, and who received, great consideration. These were no less than Captain Aylmer, member for Perivale, and his newly-married bride, Lady Emily Aylmer, *née* Tagmaggert. They were then just married, and had come down to Belton Castle immediately after their honeymoon trip. How it had come to pass that such friendship had sprung up,—or rather how it had been revived,—it would be bootless here to say. But old alliances, such as that which had existed between the Aylmer and the Amedroz families, do not allow themselves to die out easily, and it is well for us all that they should be long-lived. So Captain Aylmer brought

his bride to Belton Park, and a small fatted calf was killed, and the Askertons came to dinner,—on which occasion Captain Aylmer behaved very well, though we may imagine that he must have had some misgivings on the score of his young wife. The Askertons came to dinner, and the old rector, and the squire from a neighbouring parish, and everything was very handsome and very dull. Captain Aylmer was much pleased with his visit, and declared to Lady Emily that marriage had greatly improved Mr. William Belton. Now Will had been very dull the whole evening, and very unlike the fiery, violent, unreasonable man whom Captain Aylmer remembered to have met at the station hotel of the Great Northern Railway. ∴

“I was as sure of it as possible,” Clara said to her husband that night.

“Sure of what, my dear?”

“That she would have a red nose.”

“Who has got a red nose?”

“Don’t be stupid, Will. Who should have it but Lady Emily?”

“Upon my word I didn’t observe it.”

"You never observe anything, Will; do you? But don't you think she is very plain?"

"Upon my word I don't know. She isn't as handsome as some people."

"Don't be a fool, Will. How old do you suppose her to be?"

"How old? Let me see. Thirty, perhaps."

"If she's not over forty, I'll consent to change noses with her."

"No;—we won't do that; not if I know it."

"I cannot conceive why any man should marry such a woman as that. Not but what she's a very good woman, I dare say; only what can a man get by it? To be sure there's the title, if that's worth anything."

But Will Belton was never good for much conversation at this hour, and was too fast asleep to make any rejoinder to the last remark.

THE END.

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